

Forever– Maintaining an Eternal Perspective

Sermon 3: What’s the point of holiness?

Passages: 1 Thessalonians 4:1–8

Matthew 24:15–25

The Bible commands us to be holy—

- 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.”**
- Lev. 19:2 **“Speak to the entire assembly of Israel and say to them: ‘Be holy because I, the LORD your God, am holy.’”**
- Lev. 20:7 **“Consecrate yourselves and be holy, because I am the LORD your God.”**

And before you think that this is just an Old Testament commandment that no longer applies to us today, listen to what the New Testament has to say about holiness:

- Heb 12:14 **“Make every effort to live in peace with everyone and to be holy; without holiness no one will see the Lord.”**
- 1 Peter 1:14–16 **“As obedient children, do not conform to the evil desires you had when you lived in ignorance. But just as he who called you is holy, so be holy in all you do; for it is written: “Be holy, because I am holy.”**

Two verses from today’s reading also command us to be holy:

- 1 Thess. 4:3 **“It is God’s will that you should be sanctified (holy)”**
- 1 Thess. 4:7 **“For God did not call us to be impure, but to live a holy life.”**

Today, I want to ask two very important questions:

1. What is holiness?

2. What's the point of holiness?

Let's pray.

A shepherd boy by the name of Simeon lived near Antioch in the late 4th and early 5th centuries. He was fascinated by the Biblical idea of holiness. And so, for over 50 years, he road-tested a variety of activities to find something that would take him closer to God. These included: (1) tying rope around himself until his flesh rotted and teemed with worms, (2) burying himself up to his neck for a few months, and (3) living for 10 years with an iron ball chained to his leg. But Simeon still didn't feel holy! So he climbed on top of a pillar, 18 metres off the ground, where he stayed for 36 years until he died. From a one-metre square platform on that pillar, he preached about holiness, even convincing others to join him living on the top of pillars. They became known as 'the Stylites', named after the Greek word for 'pillar'.

With that story in mind, let's go back to Question #1—**What is holiness?**

The most common way that holiness is defined in the Bible is through a series of negatives. In other words, we most often understand holiness by what it is not! Holiness is the absence of certain things...certain attitudes, actions or behaviours...all of which are considered bad or evil. So, **to be holy is, simply, to be separated from all forms of evil.** This is exactly the reason why Simeon climbed up on that pillar—to be separated from evil!

In **verses 3–6** of today's text, Paul specifically points to separating ourselves from sexual evil. And so, he says: **"It is God's will that you should be sanctified (holy): that you should avoid sexual immorality; ⁴ that each of you should learn to control your own body in a way that is holy and honorable, ⁵ not in passionate lust like the pagans, who do not know God; ⁶ and that in this matter no one should wrong or take advantage of a brother or sister."**

Now, this exhortation to sexual holiness was common in Paul's writings. In fact, Paul writes about it in every one of his major letters! But, the reason why Paul writes about sex is simple—obviously, Paul had seen a lot of relational damage caused by improper sexual activity. He has obviously seen people (particularly men) taking sexual advantage of each other. And so, Paul calls it for what it is—**evil!** 'For this reason', says Paul, 'you must avoid it! For it is God's will that you be holy!'...(or separated from evil).

Of course, up on his pillar, Simeon was separated from sexual evil. (I understand that he ordered all women to keep away from his pillar...out of sight....so Simeon could stay 'pure'!)

The problem with this understanding of holiness is that it is dualistic. By that, I mean that Simeon believed if he could physically separate himself from evil (or what he perceived as evil, like women), then he would be holy.

But is that what holiness is all about? I don't think so! For there are many other things that Paul says we should avoid. For example, he tells us to avoid anger, jealousy, envy, hatred, and pride. He also tells us that we must avoid the love of money which is the root of all evil. The problem with all these forms of evil is that they are not physical things...things that you can physically hide from. Even up on his pillar, Simeon would have had evil thoughts! The fact is that **evil is all around us**— it can even get inside of us; in our minds and hearts!

That's why the negative definition of holiness is inadequate. No one can totally separate themselves from evil. (Even Simeon, way up on that pillar, couldn't do it!) **We need a positive definition of holiness**—we need someone to show us what holiness looks like; we need someone who can lead us into holiness!

Back in the Old Testament, the definition of holiness was primarily a negative definition. (Look at the 10 commandments,

for example.) In fact, the people of Israel were only ever given one positive definition of holiness! **“Be holy, for I am holy”**. In other words, if anyone in the Old Testament wanted a positive definition...if anyone wanted to see what holiness actually looked like... **they would have to look at God!**

Now, of course, that was a dangerous thing to do—after all, the Bible says that **“No one can see God and live!”** (Only Moses ever was given this privilege, and he only saw God’s back.) This meant that it was impossible for the people of the Old Testament to get a positive image of holiness. They could use their imaginations, but the imagination can think of all sorts of things that aren’t true about God. This meant that Israel never really had a concrete vision of what holiness really was! They only had the negative definition of holiness to live by!

We, however, are in a different situation! We can look at God and see what holiness looks like! Didn’t Jesus say, **“If you’ve seen me, you’ve seen the Father.”**??? (John 14:9) Didn’t Jesus say, **“I and the Father are One!”**??? (John 10:30) This means that, by looking at Jesus...and by reading about Him in the Gospels... we can gain a positive definition of holiness! Jesus is holiness personified.

So, tell me, what do we see when we look at Jesus? What are some of the positive ways that Jesus embodies ‘holiness’?

The first thing we notice is that, in Jesus, **holiness is always a relational concept**. In other words, holiness is **not** about staying away from people. Holiness cannot be gained by climbing up on a pillar! Jesus’ holiness was always seen in relationships...in the way He came towards us in love. Jesus’s holiness was seen in the way He welcomed sinners and reached out to the hurting and the excluded. Jesus’ holiness was seen in His attitude and actions amongst us and for us...how He searched for the lost and ultimately went to the cross that we all might find forgiveness and be set free.

By looking at Jesus, we gain a positive definition of holiness! You see, holiness is not only separation from evil. In a positive sense, holiness is love, acceptance, welcome, forgiveness, life, hope, peace. Indeed, if we put insert these words into **verse 7 of 1 Thessalonians 4**, we hear Paul saying to the church in Thessalonica—“**For God did not call us to be impure** (the negative aspect of holiness) **but to live a** (loving, accepting, welcoming, forgiving, living, hopeful, peaceful) **life**”.

That, of course, is what the Triune God has always wanted for His people. God has always wanted to bring us back to the Garden of Eden...to the place where we were once holy. I mean, the human race was originally created in holiness. When God created us, we were originally loving, accepting, welcoming, forgiving, alive, hopeful, and peaceful! In Ephesians 1:4, Paul tells us that, “**Before the creation of the world, God had already chosen us in Christ Jesus to be holy and blameless in His sight!**” We were created to be holy!

But, of course, the fall of Adam and Eve changed all that. Instead of being holy and blameless, the human race has allowed sin to deceive us and corrupt us. We have allowed all sorts of things to contaminate and destroy us so that we are no longer holy. That is, we are no longer fully human; we are no longer fully alive.

And that’s why Jesus Christ came into our world! ‘The Holy One of Israel’ came to bring back holiness to the children of Adam! Jesus came to restore us to our original humanity, made in the image of God. And so, in a positive sense, to be ‘holy’ means to be like Jesus; fully human and fully alive.

Now, this brings us to our **second question**: **What’s the point of holiness?** As I’ve been pointing out, human beings were always meant to be holy. That is how God originally created us! The trouble is that sin has diminished us and made us less than human. We mistreat each other; we hurt each other; we even destroy ourselves! We need a way to be separated from sin and

evil so that the good things that God wants to grow in us will not be hindered.

In both Hebrew and Greek, the word ‘holy’ means ‘set apart’. What this means is that, from the very beginning, we were ‘set apart’ to be agents of good and not evil. And so, the whole point of being **re-born** in Jesus is that we might be brought back to who were created to be. With Jesus as our Lord, He sets us apart for good things, not bad. In Him, we discover our true origins. We suddenly realise that God has ‘set us apart’ for love and service, not selfishness and greed. This, of course, is the reason why God gives us His Holy Spirit! You see, the Holy Spirit is also called ‘the Spirit of Holiness’. When we allow Him to come into the very centre of our being, He begins to transform us from the inside out... making us holy by shaping us into the image of Jesus Christ!

So, **what’s the point of holiness?** The point is that, in the Holy One, Jesus Christ, and by the influence of the Holy Spirit, we might discover what it means to be **truly human and truly alive!** We were made to be holy!

Before we finish, I want to look at one more verse from today’s passage. Look at the second half of **verse 6**. **“The Lord will punish men for all such sins, as we have already told you and warned you.”**

We need to look at this verse because, in actual fact, it forms part of the answer to our second question—**What’s the point of holiness?**

If you understand God’s plan for the world, you’ll know that He intends to create **“a new heaven and new earth, the home of righteousness”**. (2 Pet. 3:13) There is, however, one necessary step that God must complete before this new heaven and earth can even exist—In the preceding verses, Peter tells us that God must first destroy everything that isn’t holy. You see, before God can remake this world in perfection, He must rid the world of

everything that is utterly contaminated and corrupted by sin and evil. He must 'separate' good from evil, like a farmer separates wheat from the chaff.

And here's the point of holiness. God's separation process is going on today! And that's why you and I should be asking God, today, to make us holy...to separate the wheat from the chaff. You see, the more that God deals with the sin and corruption in our lives today, the less He'll have to deal with it tomorrow! That's why Paul talks about "**punishing evil men**". The fact is that if you don't want God to make you holy in the 'here and now', then you will have no choice but to go through his perfecting fires when He returns. According to the Scriptures, that won't be pleasant!

In the end, there are two good reasons why we should seek holiness in this life.

- First, the holy life really is true life. This is what we were created for. To be holy is to be truly human.
- Secondly, holiness **now** means less for God to fix up/ burn up in the **future**.

That's why God repeatedly says to us all-- "**Be holy, because I am holy**"

Let's pray.