

Called To Be Holy

Sermons from 1 Peter 1-2 Sermon 5

Isaiah 6:1-7; 1 Peter 1:13-21

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In the year that King Uzziah died I saw the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up; and the train of his robe filled the temple. 2 Above him stood the seraphim. Each had six wings: with two he covered his face, and with two he covered his feet, and with two he flew. 3 And one called to another and said: "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory!" 4 And the foundations of the thresholds shook at the voice of him who called, and the house was filled with smoke. 5 And I said: "Woe is me! For I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts!" 6 Then one of the seraphim flew to me, having in his hand a burning coal that he had taken with tongs from the altar. 7 And he touched my mouth and said: "Behold, this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away, and your sin atoned for." (Isaiah 6:1-7, ESV)

¹³ Therefore, preparing your minds for action, and being sober-minded, set your hope fully on the grace that will be brought to you at the revelation of Jesus Christ. ¹⁴ As obedient children, do not be conformed to the passions of your former ignorance, ¹⁵ but as he who called you is holy, you also be holy in all your conduct, ¹⁶ since it is written, "You shall be holy, for I am holy." ¹⁷ And if you call on him as Father who judges impartially according to each one's deeds, conduct yourselves with fear throughout the time of your exile, ¹⁸ knowing that you were ransomed from the futile ways inherited from your forefathers, not with perishable things such as silver or gold, ¹⁹ but with the precious blood of Christ, like that of a lamb without blemish or spot. ²⁰ He was foreknown before the foundation of the world but was made manifest in the last times for the sake of you ²¹ who through him are believers in God, who raised him from the dead and gave him glory, so that your faith and hope are in God. (1 Peter 1:13-21, ESV)

Holiness is the character and love of God shining through us. And the world needs it desperately.

Some of you are familiar with the nineteenth century Scottish pastor, Robert Murray M'Cheyne. His life, though cut short when he died at only twenty-nine, bore much fruit. During his ministry in Dundee a revival broke out, filling his church to the brim with people sometimes seven days a week. It is recounted that a man, impressed with M'Cheyne's apparent effectiveness, asked him during this time, "Sir, what do your people need most from you?" To this M'Cheyne famously replied, "What my people need from me most, is my personal holiness."

Of all the things he could have said—good teaching and preaching, pastoral care, good management, visionary leadership—he instead burrowed down to the core; **my people need my holiness.**

M'Cheyne's statement is biblical and could be said to derive from a reading of our passage in 1 Peter for today, chapter 1, verses 13–21, where Peter calls Christians “to be Holy” (v.16). In verses 13-21, Peter pivots from speaking of truths about *who* Christians are and what God is doing, to *how* Christians must respond. He shifts from theology to ethics; from being to doing. You are the elect of God; you have been born again to a new hope; even your trials are unfolding under the providential eye of God.

In response to all this, how should Christians now live their new lives?

Peter's summary statement for how Christians should now live unfolds in verses 15–16:

¹⁵ ...as he who called you is holy, you also be holy in all your conduct, ¹⁶ since it is written, “You shall be holy, for I am holy.”

Holiness can elicit a negative response. To some it sounds dull—all prayer and churchgoing, little fun. To others it looms as unattainable; holiness is reserved for only the greatest of saints.

It's also hard to define. *What is holiness? Is it good character? Is it rule-following? Is it like a luster that shines brighter the more you avoid worldly things?*

Whatever it is, it's important, for it stands as a command from God in 1 Peter. Peter is citing a passage from the Old Testament, bringing it to bear with all its force on every follower of Christ. God says, as it is written in His Word: **You are to be holy.** (Leviticus; 1 Peter)

C. S. Lewis' little comment suggests this is a theme worth exploring: “How little people know how think that holiness is dull. When one meets the real thing, it is irresistible.”¹

Our task for today will be to try and better understand the real thing; what the Bible means when it calls Christians to be holy. Turning to Scripture, we'll pose three questions about holiness: (1) *What is holiness?* (2) *How does holiness happen—how do I become holy?* (3) *How do I steward the command to be Holy?*

I. *What Is Holiness?*

A. More Than Rule-Keeping

If you asked a college student what holiness is, they may very well speak of hyper-religious people who are bent on rule-following. But there is a problem with reducing holiness to morality or religiosity.

We all know religious types, or rule-followers, who deep down aren't very good. Their religious efforts arise more from pride and self-righteousness than humility and love. We know there are bad good people. People who do a lot of so-called good, who aren't very good at all. Holiness must be about more than outward rule keeping.

B. Bible Begins with God, Not Morality

The Bible's understanding of holiness doesn't begin with morality; it begins with God. We see this in Peter's quotation of the command from Leviticus: "... it is written, "You shall be holy, for I am holy."

Peter is citing a passage from the Old Testament book of Leviticus, a book filled with rules about moral living. However, this verse suggests something deeper than mere morality. The passage says we are to be holy not because the Law is holy, but because God is holy. We can only understand holiness if we begin with God.

C. Morality and Majesty

The Bible describes God as holy many times? What does this mean? It certainly carries the idea of moral perfection. God never sins. God never errs. God never has wrong motives or evil desires. God's holiness indicates His moral perfection, the excellency of His character.

But there must be more to it than morality. When in Isaiah 6, the seraphim around the throne of God sign, "Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord of host," it wouldn't quite cut it to change out the word "holy" for "moral," so the song goes: "moral, moral, moral, is the Lord of host." God's holiness is about more than morality; it includes His majesty. God's holiness indicates His greatness, His gravitas, the weightiness of His presence that makes a man or woman fall to their knees.

God's holiness speaks of His moral perfection and absolute majesty; it is that weighty combination of absolute righteousness, stunning beauty, and complete power.

D. God Alone Is Holy

In a sense, then, God alone is holy, as Hannah sings in 1 Samuel, "There is none holy like the Lord; there is none besides you" (1 Samuel 2:2). God is the only being that is inherently holy.

However, the Bible clearly and consistently speaks of things other than God that can be holy: Jerusalem is holy, the Tabernacle and Temple, the utensils used in the Temple, priests, the people of Israel, and here in 1 Peter, Christians—all these things are spoken of as holy. We must then ask; *how does holiness happen to things other than God? How can holiness happen to me?*

II. How Does Holiness Happen to Me?

If God alone is holy, we might assume that to become holy we must go to the source; we must go to God. If true holiness is in God alone, then becoming holy must involve some sort of encounter, transaction, with God.

But God's holiness is like a burning fire of purity that incinerates everything that is impure or unclean. *How do morally imperfect, sinful, and stained people take into their arms this fire of perfection and majesty?*

Becoming Separated and Set Apart

The term we translate as "holy" in the Old Testament literally means *separated* or *set apart*. It carries the idea of something being consecrated—separated and cleansed from all that is unclean; and then being dedicated—set apart for a specific and righteous use. God, of course, is fully separate and set apart—there is no one like Him. *But how does this happen to people? How do they become separated and set apart—how do they become holy?*

Let's take a test case from Scripture. The Prophet Isaiah. The scene where Isaiah encounters God in the throne room will show us how holiness happens to mere mortals like you or me.

1. Separated: Consecrated from All That is Unclean

A. Encounter that Humbles

The first step involves a humbling—terrifying—encounter with the holy God. In Isaiah 6:1–5, the prophet encounters the blazing fire of the greatness and holiness of God:

In the year that King Uzziah died I saw the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up; and the train of his robe filled the temple. ² Above him stood the seraphim. Each had six wings: with two he covered his face, and with two he covered his feet, and with two he flew. ³ And one called to another and said: “Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory!” And the foundations of the thresholds shook at the voice of him who called, and the house was filled with smoke. ⁵ And I said: “Woe is me! For I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts!” (Isaiah 6:1–5).

The process of becoming holy begins with a view of God’s holiness that reveals the greatness of God to the human soul, while simultaneously revealing the sinfulness of the human heart. We don’t stand in the presence of the seraphim singing “holy, holy, holy,” and say, “yes, that’s true of me too—I’m holy. No, we say, “woe is me! I am unclean!”

B. Encounter that then Cleanses

But there is a second step, and it is a step that God must take. Here is how the scene proceeds:

Then one of the seraphim flew to me, having in his hand a burning coal that he had taken with tongs from the altar. ⁷ And he touched my mouth and said: “Behold, this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away, and your sin atoned for” (Isaiah 6:6-7).

To become holy, we encounter both the greatness and mercy of God. And in that mercy God exposes but then cleanses our imperfections; He atones for our sins. The coal from the altar represents the sacrifice that has been made for our sins. The coal touching Isaiah’s lips represents that sacrifice cleansing us.

Notice how this same idea plays out in our passage. Peter is calling Christians to holiness in the context of speaking of an encounter with the sacrifice of Christ:

“you were ransomed from the futile ways inherited from your forefathers, not with perishable things such as silver or gold, but with the precious blood of Christ, like that of a lamb without blemish or spot” (1 Peter 1:18-19).

The coal on the alter in Isaiah 6 prefigures the sacrifice of Christ on the Cross; and the coal touching his lips points to the blood of Christ “sprinkled on the Christian” (1.2).

Amazingly, the very quality in God—His perfect holiness—that exposes the distance between us and Him, is the same quality that overcomes it. An ingredient in God’s Holy Perfections is His Holy Love; and that Holy Love exposes imperfections with a desire not to crush, but to cleanse.

2. Set Apart: Dedicated

There is a second aspect of becoming holy. Not only is Isaiah cleansed—consecrated—he is then dedicated, or set apart, for God’s purposes. The scene in Isaiah goes on:

And I heard the voice of the Lord saying, “Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?”
Then I said, “Here I am! Send me.” (Isaiah 6:8).

Isaiah can be said to be holy in relation to God. God has cleansed him. And God has now called him. Isaiah is God’s man, and God’s holiness will now emanate through his life.

Human holiness is a derivative thing; we are not its source, but it is derived from God.² We are holy in as much as the holy character of God shines through us. We are like a prism, which God has cleansed and polished, and through which He then shines His holy light.

Consider an analogy. Imagine a geologist is stepping over a shallow creek and notices a rock slightly emerged from the mud. To the average passerby, this is just another dirty rock. But to the trained eye of the geologist, this is a geode—a rock which contains within it a layer of dazzling crystals. He takes it home and with great care removes the coarse layers of dirt and rock and reveals the dazzling beauty within. But he must do one more thing to bring forth his new treasures full glory; he must set it before the right light. It is only when the light finally passes through it, refracting in various ways and drawing out the beauty of the crystal’s colors, that its true glory shines.

Human holiness is like this. The Son of God finds us. He goes to work, removing layers of dirt and sin to expose the person we are made to be. But this is not all. The Son then sets us before the glorious light of the Father—like a man holding a prism up to the sun—and it is only when we are both cleansed by God and then filled with God’s glorious presence, that we begin to take on a glow one might call, holy.

Holiness is not something we conjure up through moral effort. Holiness happens to us—through a connection with the living God that cleanses us then fills us with His glory.

Our lives become prisms through which His holiness can shine. There is a third and final question to address. Yes, holiness happens to us. But we are also commanded to be holy. There is a stewarding of this new connection with God, whereby we posture ourselves so that the holiness of God can better shine through us. Drawing from our passage, I'll suggest three things we can do to steward this call to be holy—they all involve how we posture ourselves before the light of God's holiness.

III. How We Steward Our Holiness

1. God-Centered Mindset

In verse 13 we read that Christians are to be, “preparing your minds for action, and being sober-minded” (v.13). A first manner to steward God's call to be holy, therefore, involves the discipline of our minds—or what I would call spiritual awareness. A disciplined mindset is a mind that is not foggy, but when it looks out at the world it understands what's actually going on, what really matters, and what God is asking of them.

A God-centered mindset means we are aware of the things that misshape our thinking: Peter says in verse 14, “As obedient children, do not be conformed to the passions of your former ignorance.” We are aware of the ways we may be conformed to unholiness.

But this spiritual awareness is as healthy as what we are entertaining in our minds.

2. God-Centered Reverence: Fosters Gratitude and Humility

In verse 17 Peter turns from a mind aspect to a heart aspect, which he describes as fear. He writes,

“And if you call on him as Father who judges impartially according to each one's deeds, conduct yourselves with fear throughout the time of your exile” (1 Peter 1:17).

Here is the image of a person living before God in reverence. When the Bible calls us to fear God, it carries the sense of having a proper respect for His authority and awe for His majesty.

The person living in proper respect and awe of the greatness of God, not only is moved to obey God, but carries within himself a healthy form of humility caused by the greatness of God.

Nikolai Rostov is a young aristocrat in the novel, *War and Peace*, and member of the Russian army as it prepares to face Napoleonic forces invading from France. In an important scene before battle, as the men stand in rank, the great Russian Tsar rides before his army on horseback, offering his proud gaze to the men.

Rostov, a man of nobility himself accustomed to the presence of aristocrats, is nevertheless undone by the presence of the Tsar in such a moment—war, royalty, authority. Tolstoy’s account of Rostov’s reaction to the Tsar captures well what it means for a person to be affected by a reverence for someone great:

Rostov, standing in the foremost ranks of Kutuzov’s army, which the Tsar approached first, was possessed by ... a feeling of self-forgetfulness, a proud consciousness of might, and passionate devotion to the man round whom this solemn ceremony was centered.

One word, he thought from this man and this vast mass ... would plunge through fire and water, ready ... to face death or perform the loftiest deeds of heroism. And so he could not but tremble and feel his heart stand still at the imminence of the Emperor who was the embodiment of that word.

Rostov, so effected by the presence of this great man, says to himself, “Oh, to die, to die for him.”³

3. A Closeness to the Source

Finally, and as we’ve said from early on, our holiness is not our own, but is derivative. It derives from God’s holiness. We are holy inasmuch as we are a conduit through which the presence of God moves. This captures a relational component to our holiness—we must be walking close to God.

Peter underscores this in his use of familial language: “as obedient children,” he says in verse 14, and then “if you call on him as Father” in verse 17. As the old saying goes, “Like father, like son.”

To steward and cultivate this call to be holy, we must invite God into all parts of our lives—what we do in private and public. We must invite God into how we think about other people—especially people

whom we are tempted to judge or criticize. In each case, as an obedient child, we must be asking, “how does my Father in heaven feel towards this person? How does He want me to act?”

Our holiness is what the world needs—because it is our reflecting of the holiness of God.

When Robert Murray M’Cheyne died, here is how his biographer, Andrew Bonar, recounts the end:

That Sabbath . . . evening he went down to Broughty Ferry, and preached upon Isaiah 60:1. . . . It was the last time he was to be engaged directly in proclaiming Christ . . . and it appears that his last discourse had in it saving power to some, and that rather from the holiness it breathed than from the wisdom of its words. After his death, a note was found unopened, which had been sent to him in the course of the following week, when he lay in the fever. It ran thus: “I hope you will pardon a stranger for addressing to you a few lines. I heard you preach last Sabbath evening, and it pleased God to bless that sermon to my soul. It was not so much what you said, as your manner of speaking that struck me. I saw in you a beauty in holiness that I never saw before.”⁴

Holiness is the character and love of God shining through us. And the world needs it desperately.

Endnotes

1. C. S. Lewis, *Letters to an American Lady* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1967).
2. Sum: Holiness is not something we conjure up through moral effort. Holiness is not white-knuckling or rule-keeping. Holiness happens to us, when we encounter the God’s holy perfection, and are embraced by His Holy Love. The writer in Hebrews says “we have been made holy through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ” (Heb 10:10).
3. Leo Tolstoy, *War and Peace*, Translated by Rosemary Edmonds (New York: Penguin, 1978), 283, 284.
4. Andrew Bonar, *Robert Murray M’Cheyne* (Edinburgh, UK: Banner of Truth Trust, 1997), 187.