

CHRISTIAN BASICS

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Study Thirteen

CALLED TO HOLINESS

Holiness and sanctification, both etymologically and in usage, have the same range of meaning. The distinction to be made is probably that sanctification emphasises the action of being made holy, and holiness the state of being holy. The holiness of God is one of the dominant emphases of the Old Testament.

In the NT, the holiness of God is not frequently referred to, but Jesus portrays that holiness in flesh. (Compare the reactions of Isaiah and Peter when confronted with holiness in person; Isa. 6:1–5; Luke 5:1–8). As in the OT God's people are rendered holy by his grace and call (Eph. 1:4; Col. 3:12; II Tim 1:9; Heb 3:1; I Peter 2:5, 9), but that call has clear implications that these people will themselves seek after holiness (I Thess. 4:7; I Peter 1:15) so giving proof of the effectiveness of God's call (II Thess. 1:11; II Peter 1:10).

Our study will endeavour to sketch out:

- (a) What it means that God is holy.
- (b) The provisions of God for holy living.
- (c) How the people of God may seek to be holy.

THE HOLINESS OF GOD

It is not easy to define holiness. Initially its significance is separation, so emphasising the distance between God and man and requiring man to approach God with ceremony and sacrifice, reverence and fear. Yet clearly, the need for separation does not have significance in itself as though God's uniqueness consisted in being distant from man. Clearly this is not what the Holy One desires (Isa. 57:15). The need for separation is occasioned by the difference in character between God and man, but God's holiness must consist in what he is like in himself.

When Hannah gave thanks for the birth of Samuel, she said: 'There is none holy like the Lord, there is none beside thee; there is no rock like our God.' She had in mind God's knowledge and power and authority, his faithfulness, and justice, and so she knew God could be relied on (I Sam. 2:2). The psalmist likewise celebrated God's holiness, having in mind his power, justice, and mercy (Psalm 99; 111). So when it is said that God is holy, it means that all his actions are without fault, and in fact call forth exclamations of praise. Even unfallen creatures who have no evil to

make them feel shame and so contrast themselves with God, exclaim 'Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts.' (Isa. 6:3).

John in the NT, says that God is light and that there is no darkness in him at all (I John 1:5). One may search in all of God's actions and find only purity and right. He is the light in which all other actions must be seen and judged. Both John and Peter make it clear that holiness does not consist in a static condition, but in actions and relationships (I John 2:8–11; II Peter 3:11–14). So God's holiness, which ours can only emulate, must consist in purity, rightness, and especially love. Therefore his holiness would not be essentially that which separates us from him. In fact, the God who is holy separates people to himself, and justifies them so that they may rest in the completeness of his holiness. Paul said that the Father planned for his elect to be holy and without blame before him (Eph. 1:4), and this could only be the expression of his holiness.

As in the OT holiness is not just a comparative term as though God were only more right than others. He is ultimately right, and in the end, when all causes of offence will have been removed, the holy will not become commonplace but a cause of unending wonder.

Holiness seems to be equated with righteousness (In Heb. 12:6–11) or being perfect (in Matt. 5:48; cf. 19:21; James 1:4; 3:2).

THE HOLINESS OF JESUS

The rich young ruler who came to Jesus addressed him instinctively as 'Good teacher'. It must have been an awesome thing to be confronted by a truly good man and we presume it was this that caused him to kneel down before Jesus (Mark 10:17f.). Pilate likewise was fearful when confronted by a man in whom he could find no fault (John 19:4; 11f.). Jesus himself, with a rightful reverence for goodness, questioned the young man's right to call him good, saying that God only was good. The ruler, to have correctly discerned the goodness of Jesus, would also have to have discerned his true relationship with his Father. Sufficient to say that goodness is a quality to inspire awe, and not to be lightly attributed to anyone.

The reason behind the awesome purity and goodness of Jesus is clearly that he was the Holy One of God (Luke 1:35), a fact that demons were quick to recognise (Mark 1:24; Luke 4:34), but also the disciples (John 6:69; Acts 3:14; 4:27–30; Rev. 3:7). This title was used in the OT of Aaron (Psalm 106:16) and Elisha (II Kings 4:9) and came to have reference to the coming Messiah. As such, Jesus was to manifest not so much his own holiness as man, but to reveal the holiness of God. He taught the disciples to reverence the Father's name (Matt. 6:9); he told them that if they had seen him they had seen the Father (John 14:9), and he prayed: 'Holy Father, keep them in thy name' (John 17:11).

Therefore, although the holiness of God is not frequently mentioned in the NT it is clear that it is assumed (See I Peter 1:15ff.; Rev. 4:8) and that Jesus manifested that holiness.

THE PROVISIONS OF GOD FOR HOLY LIVING

So God's people are to be holy as he is holy. Paul said that the aim of his instruction was 'love that issues from a pure heart and a good conscience and sincere faith' (I Tim. 1:5). He knew that if people would understand the truth of the gospel they would love, and so fulfil the law. He recognised that 'the grace of God has appeared for the salvation of all men, training us to renounce irreligion and worldly passions, and to live sober, upright, and godly lives in this world' and that Christ gave himself 'to redeem us from all iniquity and to purify for himself a people of his own who are zealous for good deeds' (Titus 2:11–15). The writer of Hebrews asked God to equip his readers with everything good that they may do his will (Heb 13:21).

Jesus found that doing his Father's will was a light burden which he invited others to share (Matt. 11:28–30). When guilt is removed and men are accepted by God, the law is equally pleasant to them (Rom. 7:22). This is how God's commands were always meant to be (Deut. 30:14). The law is written on believers' hearts (Jer. 31:31). The Christian is a new creation designed and equipped for good works (Eph. 2:10). All of the aid of the Father (Phil. 2:12f.; I Thess. 5:23; Heb. 13:20f.) and the Son (Phil. 1:11; Col. 1:29) and the Spirit (Rom. 8:12–14; Gal. 5:22f.) is freely at his disposal in order to walk in holiness. In fact, the Father, Son, and Spirit live in the believer. (I John 4:12f.; Rom. 8:9–11; Matt. 10:20; Gal. 4:6; Eph. 3:14–16).

Most of the difficulty in believers pursuing holiness lies in that they choose to do it by will-power, or human culture, or by some psychic mechanism or religious practise. Such practises have as their goal the glory of man, rather than man reflecting the glory of God. The real difficulty in walking in holiness is in believing that God has provided the means to do so and that we are weak enough to need them. As Abraham found, the largest battle to fight was the fight to believe. God's working in the believer is conveyed by the Greek word 'energeia', which means operative power or working, as distinct from 'dunamis' which signifies potential power. (See Eph. 1:19; 3:7; 4:16; Phil. 3:21; Col. 1:29; 2:12). God means to bring about what he has conceived in his mind (I Thess. 5:23).

In addition to these means of holiness, God places each saint in an environment ideally suited to his growth in holiness. All things work together for good to those who are called according to his purpose—and his purpose is that they be conformed to the image of his Son (Rom. 8:28–30). Part of this providential arrangement for each Christian is that they are joined to all the people of God and commanded to love their brethren. In this setting, mutual encouragement or rebuke assists the meek in their pursuit of holiness (Prov. 19:25; Heb. 10:24f.). Gifts of the Spirit are provided to the church to facilitate maturity throughout the body of Christ (Eph. 4:11–16). God himself disciplines each of his children that they may grow in holiness (Heb. 12:10). Church discipline also plays its role (Heb. 13:17). All of Scripture, originally, the OT, but now the NT as well, is available for training in righteousness 'that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work' (II Tim 3:16f).

ONE DIED FOR ALL—SO LOVE CONTROLS

Clearly, a Christian is different after conversion and many new things are required of him. But as to what is different and how the changes are made possible there have

been varying theories. This study cannot describe and evaluate these but will seek to clarify certain issues.

Paul said he was convinced that one had died for all and that therefore all had died (II Corin 5:14). So Christians may be said to have died, and this thought is repeated in Romans 6:2ff., Galatians 2:20, and Colossians 3:1–3. In Romans, this death has the consequence of a person being justified from sin (vs 7), and in Galatians, of being freed from the law as a means of justification (vss 19; 21). The result thereafter is that the person may live to God (Romans), live to Christ (II Corin.), live by faith in the Son of God (Galatians), and set their minds on things above (Col.). There is no indication in any of these references that the death of Christ was mystically internalised in the believer. Those who try to make this so must make themselves believe something that is incomprehensible. Christ's death for us did not cause an involuntary death in us, but we were included in his death to sin for us, and the consequent moral change in us is caused by love (II Corin.5:14), or faith in him who loved (Gal. 2:20). It is this that makes it so important to reckon ourselves, or believe ourselves to have been included in his death (Rom 6:11). Justification and holiness of life are inseparable. The former is not simply a pre-requisite for the latter, but its main driving force and whole context. (I John 4:17–19). However, there is intended to be a deliberate likeness between Christ's decisive dying for our sins and our own seeking of godliness. This takes place initially when a person follows Christ—they take up their cross and follow him (Matt. 10:38; 16:24; Mark 8:34; 10:21; Luke 14:27). Such persons may be said to have 'crucified the flesh with its passions and desires' (Gal. 5:24; cf. I Peter 4:1–2). That is, their turning to Christ involves a renunciation of flesh, or repentance which is decisive. This does not mean that such a person has no more need to deal with their flesh. Rather their putting off of the deeds of the flesh must become habitual, consistent with their initial act of repentance (Rom. 8:13; II Corin.7:1; Col 3:5). This rejection of wrong is prompted by the love of Christ—or else it would never go to the lengths that it does, and is with a view to being rid of encumbrances (Heb 12:1–2) and putting in their place those things which belong to the new life (Rom. 6:7–12; Col. 3:5–17; I Peter 4:1–2). The response which began as crisis—putting on Christ, continues as process (Rom. 13:14).

Such a seeking for holiness will never become a proud pietism because the believer, by identification with Christ's death, is dead to anything that may be gloried over in human terms (Gal. 6:12–16). Nothing matters says Paul, but 'a new creation'.

In John's terms, 'No one born of God commits sin; for God's nature (seed) abides in him' (I John 3:9). Clearly, John does not teach sinless perfection seeing he earlier explained continuing forgiveness (I John 2:1–2), but he does say that it is natural for one born of God to be without sin (cf. Matt. 7:18). Peter's thought is very similar when he says: 'Having purified your souls by your obedience to the truth for a sincere love of the brethren, love one another earnestly from the heart. You have been born anew, not of perishable seed but of imperishable, through the living and abiding word of God' (I Peter 1:22f.).

So the change in a Christian must be accounted for by the access to grace God bestows on him and the dynamic relationship that ensues. The saint lives and is responsible for his actions, yet knows that he lives by another (Gal. 2:20; I Corin.15:10).

FOLLOWING AFTER HOLINESS

In the light of God's holiness and his provision for ours, it is inconceivable that Christians should be disinterested in seeking it. Those who do not should remember that God's goodness is intended to lead to repentance, and so cease their presumption. It may also be worth considering if they ever came to faith in Christ at all (II Corin.13:5).

The Scriptures urge saints to follow after holiness (Heb. 12:14), to aim at righteousness, godliness, etc. (I Tim. 6:11). We are to 'cleanse ourselves from every defilement of body and spirit, and make holiness perfect in the fear of God' (II Corin.7:1). If the summary of the law is to love God with one's whole being (heart, soul, mind, strength), and to love neighbours with the same meticulous care bestowed on ourselves, holiness, which is (behaviourally speaking) effectively the same as this, must require the focussing of all one's faculties and energies (II Peter 1:5-7). It may be objected that with the time required by day to day duties, there is little time left for seeking holiness. But this is to misunderstand holiness which is not an end in itself, but a way of doing everything. Are we to worship God? Then let it be in the beauty of holiness. Are we to relate with others, and engage in business? Then let us be holy in all our conduct (I Peter 1:15). Are we to marry? Then let that be in holiness (I Thess. 4:3-8).

Such a process will require a thinking and prayerful approach to all of life, and a responsiveness to all that is happening around us (Phil. 4:8). It will involve a renewing of one's mind (Rom. 12:1-2; II Corin.3:18), a widening of affections (II Corin.6:12), a guarding of desires (Prov. 4:23; Jude 21), resting (Heb. 4:9-11), habit forming (Gal. 6:9; II Thess. 3:13), a good use of time (Eccl. 9:10; Eph. 5:16; Col. 4:5), warfare (Eph. 6:10-18), hungering and thirsting for righteousness (Matt. 5:6), discernment (Phil. 1:9-11), decisiveness (James 1:7f.), courage (I Corin.16:13) and a yielding of our being to God (Rom. 6:19). By these things, we will keep ourselves from idols (I John 5:21), and all that is warped in this world (I John 2) so as to give ourselves to God and humanity without obstruction (Heb. 12:1). Nothing will be entered into other than by the Holy Spirit (Gal. 5:16-25; Eph. 5:18).

One writer suggests there are four motivations to holiness. The first is gratefulness, corresponding to God's grace. The second, emulation, corresponding to Christ's example. The third, obedience, corresponding to God's commandments, and the fourth, fear, corresponding to God's judgements. Instances of appeal to each of these motivations abound in the NT. To this list should be added hope, corresponding to God's promise. This is one of the most powerful of motivations and is frequently mentioned in the New Testament (II Cor. 7:1; I John 3:1-3).

The deeds of those who are holy, though surrounded with imperfection, are pleasing to God (Col. 3:20; Heb. 13:16; I John 3:22), and alternatively, what is not pleasing to him will be judged and burned (Matt. 12:36; I Corin.3:10-15; II Corin.5:10). Finally there will be a separation of those who are holy from those who are defiled (Rev. 22:10-15). Then shall the pure in heart see the Father (Matt. 5:8), and the Son (I John 3:1-3), and know in completeness the holiness they have pursued.