

† The Heart of Christ – the message of the Upper Room Discourse (John 13-17)

“...having loved His own who were in the world, He love them to the end”(John 13:1.)

The Praying Savior – John 17

The Lessons from Jesus’ Prayer – John 17:1-26

Seven Characteristics of the Church: Holiness (John 17:14-16)

Through the prophet Isaiah, the Lord God asked a penetrating question of His people Israel; a question that would do all well to consider. He asks in Isaiah 46:5,

To whom would you liken Me and make Me equal and compare Me, that we would be alike?

What are the words we can use to aptly describe the person and character of the one true God? Of course, we do have words by which we make our attempts and best efforts to describe God; we call Him Creator, we call Him love, we call Him righteous and faithful; we call Him the great and awesome God. Such a list could go on and on as we try to nail down in words the breadth and scope of God. But there is a word of words that is used to identify God; an attribute of attributes if you will with which we strive to exalt and honor God; seeking to see Him in His loftiness and grandeur. What is that word? Yes, some of you have already discerned that the word of words by which we describe God is by saying that God is “holy.”

And it would be nice if that were the end of it, wouldn’t it? That by saying that God is “holy” we have indeed said it all because each one of us is able to grasp the fullness of the meaning of the word “holy”. As I have been considering the holiness of God, both this week as well as through my life time, I am more and more convinced that I know little about the holiness of God. Don’t get me wrong, I have seen and heard and comprehended God’s holiness; but at best, I have seen but a glimpse of His holiness; I have been exposed to non-lethal amounts of God’s holiness, for whatever the holiness of God is in its fullness, I am sure that it would, in our present condition, consume and destroy us all. Is it any wonder that Isaiah the prophet, this faithful and righteous priest of God, upon seeing a vision of the Lord in His holiness cried out in Isaiah 6:5, **“Woe is me, for I am ruined!”** When was the last time that your vision of God left you with such a feeling? When Isaiah said “woe is me” he was cursing himself for as he compared himself to God, he saw himself as ruined – as coming undone – coming apart at the seams. If each of us were to truly compare ourselves to God, we too could only conclude that we would be undone.

But what then is this holiness of God that caused the righteous prophet, a man who loved the Lord to declare that he was coming apart. Surely Isaiah knew what is the holiness of God. Surely every preacher and every educated believer in Jesus Christ knows what is the holiness of God. I can see some of you mouthing the words. I know what some of you are thinking; for the word holy means simply, “to be set apart.” Beloved, there is nothing simple about holiness. So vast and comprehensive is the meaning of the word “holy” that a German Scholar by the name of Rudolf Otto coined a special term for it. He referred to the word “holy” as the *mysterium tremendum* – or in English, the “awful mystery.” Otto realized that at best we can describe holiness and see the effects of holiness, but always there remains some aspect of holiness that defies explanation. Beloved, I love that God’s attribute of attributes, that word that is used to describe God’s love as a holy love; God’s wrath as a holy wrath; God’s knowledge as holy knowledge and you can apply the rest; with are then faced with coming to grips with this superlative word that speaks to us simultaneously of that which we know about God as well as

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that which we don't know about God. The holiness of God is where every believer (and unbeliever) ought to begin if he or she is to come rightly before Him. As the great Reformer John Calvin said,

Hence that dread and amazement with which, as Scripture uniformly relates, holy men were struck and overwhelmed whenever they beheld the presence of God...Men are never duly touched and impressed with a conviction of their insignificance, until they have contrasted themselves with the majesty of God.

But what then is the holiness of God (and as some of you are wondering, what does this have to do with our text in the High Priestly prayer of Jesus)? Let us begin by doing the best we can to define this word holiness for it will have a profound impact upon our understanding of the text.

Most of us are accustomed to defining “holy” or “holiness” as “set apart”. We tend to think of holiness as relating to moral purity and perfection. Someone who is holy is pure and God is in fact the purist of them all. And while this is a legitimate use of the word holy, it is not the primary meaning of the word.

In both the Old and New Testaments, the primary meaning of the word “holy” is “separate.” The verb form of the word means “to cut” or “to separate.” We might say then that to be holy means “to be cut apart.” Or we might say that the word holy means “a cut above the rest.” Holiness speaks of distinction, of that which separates one thing from another. In the Old Testament, the Levites had utensils and bowls and cups that were for their own daily use, but then they had holy cups and bowl, those that were a cut above the rest, those that were distinct from the rest that were only to be used in the worship of the Lord.

With reference to God then, the fact that He is holy tells us that He is separate from all others; that He is not only a cut above the rest, but that He is absolutely different and distinct from anything and everyone else. And so we come back to Isaiah 46:5, **“To whom would you liken Me and make Me equal and compare Me, that we would be alike?”** R.C. Sproul says that the word “holy” speaks of something that is foreign, something that is “other” than anything we know. There is nothing common about holiness, in fact, to be holy is to be absolutely uncommon; to be uniquely distinct and separated from all that is common. We see God communicate this to Aaron the priest after his sons, Nadab and Abihu offered what the Scriptures call “strange fire” to the Lord as an act of worship. In short, Nadab and Abihu sought to worship the Lord in a way other than God's way and God consumed with fire for their act of disobedience. But hear what the Lord said to Moses and to Aaron about this incident as recorded in Leviticus 10:3 and 10,

By those who come near Me, I will be treated as holy [separate from all others – don't treat Me as you would treat common people], and before all the people I will be honored...so as to make a distinction between the holy and the profane [common], and between the clean and the unclean.

So then, this is our God, the holy; the other; the separate One; utterly unique; vastly pure and set apart; distinct and distinguishable from anything common. With this brief lesson on

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holiness, let us now see how this relates to what Jesus next prays for as a defining characteristic of the church. Let us read John 17:14-16;

14 I have given them Your word; and the world has hated them, because they are not of the world, even as I am not of the world. 15 I do not ask You to take them out of the world, but to keep them from the evil one. 16 They are not of the world, even as I am not of the world.

Beloved, in a word we find Jesus here praying that one of the defining characteristics of His people, of you and me, is that we would be holy; that we would be utterly unique and vastly pure, set apart, distinct and distinguishable from all others. Ultimately, we are called to be separate; uncommon in the midst of a sea of commonness. We are in fact called to be like God in holiness. We are called here to be like Christ, separate from the world. Look again at our text and see if this is not the very theme as Jesus says twice, once in verse 14 and again in verse 16 **“they are not of the world, even as I am not of the world.”** In other words, even as Jesus is separate, distinct, a cut above and therefore not a part of the world, believers in Jesus are to be and live likewise. We are to be holy even as the Lord is holy. Is this not the command of Leviticus 11:44 to Israel and is it not the same call to believers in 1 Peter 1:15-16 where we read, **“but like the Holy One who called you, be holy yourselves also in all your behavior; because it is written, “You shall be holy, for I am holy.”** Our words, our actions, everything we do is to be in distinction, in contrast and separated from the world. We learn in Ephesians 1:4 that this privileged position of holiness, of Christlikeness was something we’ve been chosen for as we read, **“just as [the Father] chose us in [Jesus] before the foundations of the world, that we would be holy and blameless before Him.”**

Beloved, you and I are set apart to be holy; to behave and act even as Jesus Christ. This is what a believer in Jesus Christ is; one who is separate from the world; not of this world. Charles Spurgeon once asked, **“What is a Christian?”** His answer, **“If you compare him with a king, he adds priestly sanctity to royal dignity. The king’s royalty often lieth only in his crown, but with a Christian it is infused into his inmost nature.”** In other words, because we have Christ; because we are in Christ and Christ is in us by His Spirit, there has to be a difference; something that distinguishes us from the world around us. Spurgeon goes on to say in effect that the Christian is as much above his surrounding unbelievers through his new birth as a man is above the beasts of the earth. Surely then the Christian ought to carry himself, in all that he does, as one who is not one of the crowd, but chosen out of the world, distinguished by sovereign grace, written among those who are a peculiar people and who therefore refuse to grovel in the dust as others do, live in such a manner as is nothing more than the way of the world. And listen again to Spurgeon specifically as he wrote, **“Let the dignity of your nature, and the brightness of your prospects, O believers in Christ, constrain you to cleave unto holiness, and to avoid the very appearance of evil.”**

This then is the meaning behind the twice repeated statement of Jesus when He said that **“they are not of the world, even as I am not of the world.”** But what now are the lessons for us in this? What is it that we are to understand and do in light of this truth?

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Before we look at these lessons, let us first note that when we speak of holiness, we must note that there are two facets or aspects of holiness for the believer. First, there is what we call positional holiness. At the moment of the new birth, as we are born into the family of God, as we confess with our mouth Jesus as Lord and believe that He spilt His blood and died on that cross in our place and that by Jesus righteous act on the cross, we ourselves are made righteous, we are called holy – literally “saints”. All born-again children of God are saints even though not all such children live up to this position.

The second aspect of holiness is called practical or progressive holiness. This is what Peter referred to when he called us to be holy ourselves in all our behavior because the Lord Himself is holy. That we would live increasing separate lives from the manner and means of the world. This then is the person who cries out to be delivered from the lust that wages a war in his heart. It is the person who prays to be delivered from the anger that he feels continually; or from the despondency and depression that robs him of his godly joy. Beloved, such things are common among the world; the world is depressed, the world is angry; and the world lusts. But we are to live uncommon lives, distinguished lives. How do we do this? How do we live out the practical holiness that Jesus prays for His people?

In our text there are at least three lessons we must know and then practice if we are to be the separate people Jesus prays for. First, we must know the provision for holiness – which is the Word of God. Second, we must know the proof of holiness – which is the world’s response to our lives when properly lived in holiness. And third, we must know the preservation of holiness – which is God’s own keeping and protecting us from the evil that would nullify our holiness.

I. The Provision for Holiness (John 17:14a)

“I have given them Your word...”

Let us begin then with the provision of holiness. How is it that we can know and live out this practical holiness? The easy answer is “the Word of God.” Nearly every one of us is familiar with Psalm 119:9 – **“How can a young man keep his way pure [separate and holy]? By keeping it [his life] according to Your word.”** And then we read in verse 11, **“Your word I have treasured in my heart, that I may not sin against You.”** And here we see an important correlation. The more familiar, the more intimate, the more delighted you are with God’s word, seeing it as the revelation of who God is and as the very source of your truly living; the more you will be able to live a holy, a Christlike and separate from this world life.

To be sure, there is nothing “magical” about the words themselves; but we must know that God have given us His word and has promised to work through His word to inspire and instruct us in holiness. If I want to know what God is like, I must read His Word; and as I read His Word I see an awesome, fearsome, majestic and utterly wonderful God. And if I want to know how this God desires me to live before him, to live a holy life, then I must again come to the Word again and again; and be delighted to learn and practice those things that God says honor Him. In short, your continued response to the Word of God is a barometer to how holy or unholy your life is. If you had to give an account for your delight and pursuit of holiness through the word of God, how would you measure up?

Jesus says in our text, “I have given them Your word.” He is saying, “I have told them who You are; I have told them what you require and they have believed, they have responded, they

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have forsaken their old ways of thinking. And while they are not fully there yet, they have received Your Word and want to be holy; they have received Your Word and want to know it more.” The implication behind Jesus saying, **“I have given them Your word”** is that they have indeed received it and responded to it. The idea here is not too far removed from Paul’s statement about the Thessalonian believers’ response when wrote, **“For this reason we also constantly thank God that when you received the word of God which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men, but for what it really is, the word of God, which also performs its work in you who believe.”** Did you catch that last thought, that it is the word of God that performs a work in believers? What work is that? It is the work of practical holiness, of being less and less influenced by and therefore distinguished from the thinking of the world. Is this not the testimony of 2 Timothy 3:16-17 where we read, **“All Scripture [the word of God] is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness; so that the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work [holy].”**

Let me say it again, that there is a direct connection between the intensity of your practical holiness and your love and commitment to knowing the word of God. The word of God separates us from the world. Listen to how David summarized the holy effects of God’s word in a believer’s life in Psalm 19:7-10;

7 The law of the Lord is perfect, restoring the soul; The testimony of the Lord is sure, making wise the simple. 8 The precepts of the Lord are right, rejoicing the heart; The commandment of the Lord is pure, enlightening the eyes. 9 The fear of the Lord is clean, enduring forever; The judgments of the Lord are true; they are righteous altogether. 10 They are more desirable than gold, yes, than much fine gold; Sweeter also than honey and the drippings of the honeycomb.

If we are to be a people of the Book, we must be a people in the Book. We are to be a people of the Book and we are to know that holiness begins with an appreciation for what God has communicated to you through His word. If you are not reading, studying and applying God’s Word then you cannot be practically holy. Beloved, do not be content with a little of God’s Word for it is akin to saying that you are content with a little of God and with a little holiness. How would you describe your intake of God’s word? Is it little, is it non-existent? Is it much but not contemplated or practiced.

II. The Proof of Holiness (John 17:14b)

“...the world has hated them, because they are not of the world, even as I am not of the world.”

So then; we are given God’s word. How then can we know if we are rightly practicing what we read and learn? Jesus says that as a result of His disciples being given the word, the revelation of God; what was the world’s response? The world **“has hated them.”** The word “hate” means to detest; to find repulsive. I remember once riding in the back seat of a car next to a young child who got car sick and proceeded to vomit on me, from my shirt to my pants to my shoes. I was utter repulsed and it was all I could do to not respond in kind. Beloved, how can we know if we are living holy lives according to God’s word? How does the world respond to our

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behavior and our thinking? And let's be clear, let us not comfort ourselves by saying, “Well Christianity in general is hated by the population, or is hated by Muslims, or by the cults.” No friends, the question is this, what does your life communicate to other about God and what He demands of people? To be holy is to be radical; it is to be a rebel against all the world holds near and dear.

Let me share some words and phrases that are usually indicative or descriptive of someone *not* living a holy, separate and radical life: “go with the crowd; don't rock the boat; play it safe; play by the rules; walk the wide road paved with moderation; the middle ground; compromise; a personal faith.” Why are we so willing to go unnoticed and to keep quite? Is it because we are more concerned about what our neighbors think; or our classmates think; or our co-workers think that what God thinks?

I know we've taught this before, but don't we find the Scriptures repeatedly telling us that if we live for Christ, we will be persecuted, we will be hated. Peter had to remind his readers in 1 Peter 4 that in light of the fact that the Christians were not partying any more and not living like they used to live, that they are surprised and, according to verse 4, they malign you; they persecute you, they scoff and ridicule. And as these believers continue to live their holy lives for Jesus in the midst of unbelievers, Peter reminds them in verse 12, **“Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal among you, which comes upon you for your testing, as though some strange thing were happening to you...”** Beloved, we should not be surprised when the world hurls its insults and calls us names and hates our thinking and lifestyles. What ought to surprise us is when few or no one is doing this. Jesus said that the world would hate His followers even as they hated Him because they lived by the Book, according to the Word of God, by means of a standard the world does not want or understand. Beloved, one of the proofs of living a holy life is the world's response to you. How is the world responding to you?

III. The Preservation of Holiness (John 17:15)

“I do not ask You to take them out of the world, but to keep them from the evil one.”

I am so glad the Lord Jesus included this statement here. It reminds us that even in our pursuit of practical holiness that ultimately it is God who is at work in us, preserving, keeping, and protecting us from both evil in general as well as from the evil one. Let me say this another way, we are holy and separate from the world, uncommon and distinguishable because of the holy life of Jesus within us. The foundation of our holiness is in our possessing the holiness of Jesus Christ that we received when we believed upon Him as Lord and Savior. Listen carefully, if the holiness of Jesus dwells within me, such holiness never breeds attitudes of laziness in our lives. Because we are holy in Jesus, we will pursue holiness in our daily lives. The working of holiness in my life is the working of God in my life.

But behind the scenes; in all the ups and downs of life as you seek to live before the Lord in holiness; never forget that it is the Lord's holiness in you. It is the holiness of Jesus being work from the inside out. What a comfort. The Lord who began this work of holiness in you will complete it. But a part of the process is to go through trials and temptations. It is God's will that we maintain a holy life in the midst of an unholy world. Therefore, we do not see God removing us from hardships and trials, but He brings them right to our doors so that we might look to him for the grace and strength to endure them in such a way that reveals His holiness and His glory.

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John Calvin said it this way, “God does not take His people out of the world, because He does not want them to be soft and slothful; but He delivers them from evil that they may not be overwhelmed. For He wishes them to fight; but does not allow them to be mortally wounded.” Beloved, living in holiness is a fight; it takes effort; it says to one’s heart, “Be strong; be courageous; be careful to do all according to God’s Word and do not let God’s word depart from my mouth, but let me meditate on it day and night so that I may be careful to do all that is written in it. For then I will be prosperous and have success; preserved from evil.”

Beloved, let us not forget that every act of holiness is bound up in the holiness of God and ultimately it is for God’s glory. As we face evil in this world, we must know that it is God who keeps us; for I promise you that we cannot keep ourselves for evil. But God protects and preserves us. By His grace He allows us to pursue lives separate from evil, separated unto God and His purposes.

And so, let me ask you; can you be characterized as being practically holy? Are you seeking to be separated unto God? For anything we separate ourselves to other than God is idolatry. Let us not be a people who simply talk the talk and put on a good show; but let us be a people committed to the standard and conduct of the Word of God; knowing that the world will be disgruntled, but we will be protected from evil and ought to stand in wonder that the God who is holy has called us to mirror His holiness in this lost and crooked generation. Let us wonder at the holiness of God in us and say with Saint Augustine,

What is that which gleams through me and smites my heart without wounding it? I am both a-shudder and a-glow. A-shudder, in so far as I am unlike it, a-glow in so far as I am like it.

May we both tremble at and tell of the holiness of God and may it be found increasingly in us to the glory of God.

Soli Deo Gloria

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