

HOW MORALITY IS DESTROYING HOLINESS

For many Christians, "holiness" conjures up musty images of revival meetings, gospel singers, and old-time religion-along with stern prohibitions against drinking, dancing, and playing cards. And many are happy to leave these notions of holiness in the past. Yet even in our era of megachurches and post-modern emerging churches, holiness (when it is discussed at all) is often associated with moral behaviour such as sexual purity, financial honesty, and commitment to private prayer.

While we've cast off old, legalistic notions of holiness, we've merely replaced them with private, moralistic notions. We act as if holiness were either outdated or something that characterizes only a small (if important) part of our lives.

This is partly due to our quest for cultural relevance, which is defended in the name of winning others to Christ. If we talk about holiness with unbelievers, won't that present just another hurdle for them to overcome on their way to Christ? For this and other reasons, we are rapidly forsaking our historic commitment to holiness. Recent polls show that many Christians march in moral step with mainstream culture in practices of divorce, spousal abuse, extramarital sex, pornography consumption, materialism, and racism, just to name a few. While we tip our cap to the importance of holiness, many in our culture don't view us as morally different in any meaningful way-except to see us as hypocrites.

I believe one crucial ingredient to healing our moral confusion is the recovery of the biblical idea of holiness, which includes private morality but so much more-the very life of God in us. Holiness stands at the beginning and centre of God's call on our lives: "Be holy, because I am holy" (Lev. 11:44; 1 Pet. 1:16).

Biblical terms translated "holy" or "holiness" carry a strong secondary connotation of moral purity. But moral purity is not, first and foremost, what Scripture is talking about. Instead, the most basic meaning of the words is to be "set apart" or "dedicated" to God. "I will be your God, and you will be my people," says Yahweh (Lev. 26:12; Heb. 8:10). Thus, prior to any consideration of morality, biblical holiness describes a unique relationship that God has established and desires with his people. This relationship has moral ramifications, but it precedes moral behaviour. Before we are ever called to be good, we are called to be holy. Unless we understand this, we fall into the inevitable trap of reducing holiness to mere morality.

To be a Christian means far more than merely to believe in God - it means to be united with Jesus in and through the Holy Spirit. The entire biblical narrative of God's covenant-making with his people reveals that it is only in loving response to what God has done that we lead holy lives. Anything short of this understanding will collapse back into the notion that holiness is our doing, rather than God's. But when this priority is maintained, it provides an unshakeable foundation upon which our faltering attempts to lead holy lives may be rooted and established. Contrary, then, to any notion of mere moral conformity, true holiness is a grateful collaboration with God in seeking to live out our human life as He intends.

With these thoughts in mind, we begin to see how much more God is asking of us than mere morality. As long as our notions of holiness are limited to doing certain things and not doing other things, we can go through our entire lives obeying the rules (or at least maintaining the appearance of doing so) without dealing with a far more fundamental question: To whom do we give our first love and loyalty?

To be a disciple of Jesus Christ requires nothing less than death to our fallen, egocentric selves in order that we might live in and for him. "For whoever wants to save his life will lose it," says Jesus, "but whoever loses his life for me and for the gospel will save it. What good is it for a man to gain the whole world, yet forfeit his soul?" (Mark 8:35-36).

This question of our ultimate love, loyalty, and identity is what contemporary Christians must ask. More than any other value, the notion that we are the masters and proprietors of our own lives stands in direct opposition to our call to be set apart to God. To be holy means that all we are and all we have belongs to God, not ourselves, and that every aspect of our lives is to be shaped and directed toward God.

The implications of this teaching are myriad. We need only contemplate it for a moment before they begin to confront us at virtually every level of our lives as disciples of Jesus. Our money, our possessions, our time, our relationships, our work, our entertainment, our diet, our sexuality-in all of these areas and more, God's call to holiness confronts the abysmal narcissism of mainstream western culture, which considers all of these to belong to the individual self to be used (or abused) at our own discretion. So endemic is this narcissism that many Christians see Jesus as little more than a means of augmenting their "health and prosperity" or emotional "well-being" rather than our lives orbiting around the life of Jesus Christ.

Scripture presents an antidote to narcissism and the chief training ground for holiness: the church of Jesus Christ. The call of God comes not to isolated individuals, but to a people: the people of Israel in the Old Testament and the people of Jesus, Jew and Gentile, in the New Testament. Those who are united with Christ in the Holy Spirit are also united with one another-whether we wish to be or not-as the body and bride of Christ. God calls us to be set apart from the fallen, demonic structures of the world, the flesh, and the devil to be set apart to the new humanity given birth through the incarnate Word and life-giving Spirit.

Modern western Christianity has capitalized on the rise of individualism and owes a great deal of its success to our ability to crystallize the gospel in terms that individuals can grasp and appropriate. That being said, we must never forget that the church is a God-created, non-negotiable reality of which all disciples of Jesus are a part and to which we are called to commit.

There is no such thing as love for God that does not include love for God's people (1 John 4:20). But to love God's people also means allowing God's people to love us, and that requires entering into real relationships of loving support and gracious accountability with fellow Christians. This gives us greater clarity as to aspects of our lives where the need for holiness is most pressing. And as we inevitably come into conflict, we grow in our capacity to "bear with each other and forgive one another," just as the Lord has forgiven us (Col. 3:13).

The more we allow our lives to interact with the life of God's people, the more we come to know at every level not only that we are a part of the church, but that we are the church-and the church is us. In Christ, we are "being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit" (Eph. 2:22).

Finally, we are set apart as the church for the sake of others. Peter tells us that we are "a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light" (1 Pet. 2:9). To be holy, to be set apart to God, is never an end in itself but is always for the sake of the world. From the beginning, God has intended that his covenant people be the means by which all the nations of the world are blessed. Far from leading to self-righteous, world-abnegating sectarianism, true biblical holiness leads us to participate in the ministry of reconciliation that God has given to his people (2 Cor. 5:18-19). Through this ministry, people of every nation, tribe, and tongue will come to know the love of God that is in Christ Jesus.

"Be holy, because I am holy," says our Lord. Holiness is not primarily about moral purity. It's primarily about union with God in Christ and sharing in Christ's holiness. It's secondarily about life in grateful service to God and others. Only a biblical, Christ-centered holiness will safeguard Christians from the trap of moralism and help us recover our spiritual footing in today's world.

Source: by Joel Scandrett Associate Editor InterVarsity Press