

A Holy People

Deuteronomy 7:1-10

What does it mean to be holy? That can be a tricky question to answer. It gets even trickier if I would ask, what does it mean to be a holy nation? Or a holy people.

What, then, is the definition of holy, and what does it really mean? Those are the questions before us this morning. And in one sense, the initial definition is not hard to explain at all. It means to be set apart. That is the root meaning of the word, and the most plain and regular way of putting it. To be holy simply means to be set apart.

So you people sitting over here on my right are set apart from you people sitting over here on my left. You are set apart by that middle aisle. So you are holy. In one sense, yes, that is correct. With a bare, literal meaning of word. But when the Bible uses the word, it means quite a bit more. The separation is identified by certain, very specific things. Holiness is used to describe God's people as they are separated from all the other people of the world. So, over here, are all of God's people. In the Old Testament, that became known as Israel. The nation of Israel. The nation of God's people.

And over here are all the other nations, called the Gentiles. That was it. Those were the only two groups. The Jews of Israel over here, separated and identified as distinct from the Gentiles of all the other nations. And that is why this promised land was such a big deal, because when the people of God were finally able to enter the promised land, and take possession of it, when it would become their land, the land of Israel, then this holiness was easy to identify and define. God's people would be over here, all together, separated and distinct from all the other nations.

In our text this morning, several of those other nations are identified, the nations who would be displaced in order for Israel to be established.

v.1-2

Immediately, that raises a question, doesn't it? How can God command all the people in those nations to be killed? That was the command, that was what the people of Israel were supposed to do. And the only way to understand that is in this context of a holy nation. And, as I stressed so much last week, the reality is that the history of this nation wasn't just a bare history. It was the outworking of God's great work of salvation. The history of Israel was the story of God's work of redemption, and that whole history is a type, and a picture illustration, of salvation. But it is not a pattern that has a moral equivalent today. There is nothing here in our text to justify God's people today conquering and killing other nations in order to establish their holiness, separated out to be the nation of God. But that was the meaning of Old Testament history. God was separating out his people from all the other people of the world. This nation of Israel was, therefore,

I. A PEOPLE SEPARATED BY GOD.

God did it. God determined their identity. God would establish their nation. This history is the story of redemption, and this nation, Israel, would therefore represent us, the people of God today. That principle of separation is very valuable, very helpful to understand. Again, my emphasis, it is the principle of holiness. Holiness is separation.

Let me note something first of all, in that context, which is that God does the separating.

v.6 "For you are a holy people to the Lord your God."

So it's not just a separation between people divided by a

middle aisle. It's far more significant and meaningful than that. It is a separation which God has established. And it is that separation that gives God's people their very identity and the definition of their existence. "You are a holy people to the Lord your God."

This is a very, very familiar theme. It is repeated in, Deut. 14:1 "You are the children of the Lord your God; you shall not cut yourselves nor shave the front of your head for the dead. 2 For you are a holy people to the Lord your God, and the Lord has chosen you to be a people for Himself, a special treasure above all the peoples who are on the face of the earth."

And, Deut. 28:9 "The Lord will establish you as a holy people to Himself, just as He has sworn to you, if you keep the commandments of the Lord your God and walk in His ways. 10 Then all peoples of the earth shall see that you are called by the name of the Lord, and they shall be afraid of you."

This idea was made clear back at Mt. Sinai, Ex. 19:5 "Now therefore, if you will indeed obey My voice and keep My covenant, then you shall be a special treasure to Me above all people; for all the earth is Mine. 6 And you shall be to Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.' These are the words which you shall speak to the children of Israel."

Most clearly, in the fulfillment of the New Testament, we read, 1 Peter 2:9 "But you are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, His own special people, that you may proclaim the praises of Him who called you out of darkness into His marvelous light; 10 who once were not a people but are now the people of God, who had not obtained mercy but now have obtained mercy."

God separates a people for himself, and the obvious emphasis here and throughout the whole Bible is that God does it by his own choice. The holy people of God are,

A. Separated by God's choice.

I made add for appropriate emphasis, God's sovereign choice. In other words, solely by his choice, completely, entirely by his choice, not based upon anything in the people.

v.6

So how did these people of Israel become separated out to be God's people? By God's choice. He chose to separate them. He chose them for himself. And that is the foundation of the relationship between God and his people. Then and now. From the beginning of the Old Testament to the end of the New Testament. He chose us! Never is that clearer than in the great doxology which Paul writes at the beginning of Ephesians.

Eph. 1:3 "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ, 4 just as He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and without blame before Him."

This choice of God is, in fact, his greatest blessing to us. And it is rightly emphasized in terms of its priority in terms of time. "He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world." I hope to you picked up the next words of Paul, as well, "that we should be holy." He chose us that we should be holy, set apart. And that is our identity as Christians.

This choosing by God is sometimes identified with reference to time, as Paul continues in,

Eph. 1:4 "...in love, 5 having predestined us to adoption as sons by Jesus Christ to Himself."

Similarly, Paul's emphasizes the free and sovereign will of God in that choice, continuing further in,

Eph. 1:5 "...according to the good pleasure of His will, 6 to the praise of the glory of His grace, by which He made us accepted in the Beloved."

It was God's good pleasure. It was the determination of his will. It was his purpose. His decree. His choice. God's people are separated as holy by God's choice. With the great purpose of redemption, or salvation, if I can finish that passage in,

Eph. 1:7 "In Him we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of sins, according to the riches of His grace 8 which He made to abound toward us in all wisdom and prudence, 9 having made known to us the mystery of His will, according to His good pleasure which He purposed in Himself."

God separates his people to be holy to himself. And then, the result.

v.6 "...a special treasure above all the peoples on the face of the earth."

You see, God's people are,

B. Separated by God's delight.

It's not a bare, objective, dispassionate choice. He chose us as his people in order to take delight in us, and I don't want you to miss that emphasis. We saw that same emphasis in 1 Peter earlier, "His own special people."

That is the great encouragement for our praise as well, as we read in,

Psalms 135:1 "Praise the Lord! Praise the name of the Lord; Praise Him, O you servants of the Lord! 2 You who stand in the house of the Lord, In the courts of the house of our God, 3 Praise

the Lord, for the Lord is good; Sing praises to His name, for it is pleasant. 4 For the Lord has chosen Jacob for Himself, Israel for His special treasure."

This is a very encouraging and edifying was in which we should consider God's sovereign choice, and it ought to frame your thinking on the whole subject of election. God's choice. He chose us in order to delight in us! He chose us to be his own special treasure. Those two ideas are joined together.

And that is what is spoken so clearly here in Deuteronomy 7. v.6 "For you are a holy people to the Lord your God; the Lord your God has chosen you to be a people for Himself, a special treasure above all the peoples on the face of the earth."

We read similarly in,

Psalms 18:16 "He sent from above, He took me; He drew me out of many waters. 17 He delivered me from my strong enemy, From those who hated me, For they were too strong for me. 18 They confronted me in the day of my calamity, But the Lord was my support. 19 He also brought me out into a broad place; He delivered me because He delighted in me."

With a very important reminder in the next verse, that we are,

C. Separated by God's love.

Again, not just a bare choice. But a choice of love. Not just a sovereign choice, but a choice of love. And it was a love which originated in him. That's the whole point. It had nothing to do with the people. It has nothing to do with how large a group they were or how strong they were. It has nothing to do with us.

v.7

He loves you...not for those reasons that you might think

would make someone lovable. He loves you, because he chose you. He chose to love you.

Eph. 1:4 "...in love, 5 having predestined us to adoption as sons by Jesus Christ to Himself..."

He chose us, he separated us, in his love.

v.8 "...but because the Lord loves you."

Deut. 10:15 "The Lord delighted only in your fathers, to love them; and He chose their descendants after them, you above all peoples, as it is this day."

The whole story of redemption is rooted in this sovereign, electing love of God. Even as the very familiar verse of the gospel promise reminds us,

John 3:16 "For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life. 17 For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world through Him might be saved."

There is one more aspect of God's loving choice to separate us that I want to emphasize, still with a focus upon God himself and not upon us as the recipients of his love. That emphasis is what I would describe as our being,

D. Separated by God's covenant faithfulness.

We are separate from the other nations of world, not simply because of God's choice or his motive of love, but with that, his faithfulness. What he chooses to do, he does! What he promises to do, he is faithful to accomplish.

v.8

God made a promise, didn't he? An oath. It was first made

clear to Abraham.

Gen. 12:1 "Now the Lord had said to Abram: "Get out of your country, From your family And from your father's house, To a land that I will show you. 2 I will make you a great nation; I will bless you And make your name great; And you shall be a blessing. 3 I will bless those who bless you, And I will curse him who curses you; And in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed."

Paul calls that the promise of the gospel.

Gal. 3:8 "And the Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel to Abraham beforehand, saying, "In you all the nations shall be blessed." 9 So then those who are of faith are blessed with believing Abraham."

God made a promise. And God would keep his promise.

v.9-10

God keeps his covenant promise for a thousand generations! And that means, forever. Until the end of the age. Until Jesus returns.

Notice the obvious separation there as well. Holiness implies that separation, doesn't it? If you are holy to the Lord, if you are separated to the Lord, then those from whom you separate are the ones who face God's just judgment and wrath.

And there is only one reason why you don't experience that judgment and wrath, that your sins deserve. Because God separated you. God chose you. God loved you. And God delights in you, you who, by faith in Jesus, are his special treasure.

I'm stressing all of this because I want you to realize just how directly the Old Testament people of God represent us as the

New Testament people of God. In the Old Covenant, the truth of redemption was made clear and evident in the life and history of the nation of Israel. And that's why we're studying that history, because it teaches us so much about relationship to God now, in our day. And those words of Peter just keep coming up,

1 Peter 2:9 "But you are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, His own special people, that you may proclaim the praises of Him who called you out of darkness into His marvelous light."

You who believe in Jesus, you are that holy nation. We who belong to Jesus, together, we are that holy nation. And as such, we are to be,

II. A PEOPLE SEPARATED FROM THE WORLD.

That's what's happening to Israel, as they are separated from all those nations mentioned in verse 1. That's what is happening to Israel as they conquer and utterly destroy all those nations. And that what happens to us when we believe in Jesus and join together with God's people as his special treasure.

Two examples are given of this separation from the world, two areas of life in which God's people are called to be separate and set apart from the world. And the first is marriage. We are,

A. Separated by marriage.

v.3

On the surface, there is an easy application for us, just as it was for the Israelites, that we are to marry only from within this holy nation. With good reason, that given the most intimate and inseparable connection of marriage, you may not fully be able to remain faithful to God and a husband or wife who does not love the Lord. And there will be an almost inescapable conflict when it

comes to teaching and training children, given the covenant promises of God from generation to generation, to us and our children.

v.4

So an Israelite was only to marry another Israelite. So it is with Christians.

Paul addresses many questions regarding marriage in 1 Corinthians 7, and one of them is the choice of remarriage when a spouse dies. His wisdom is clear,

1 Cor. 7:39 "A wife is bound by law as long as her husband lives; but if her husband dies, she is at liberty to be married to whom she wishes, only in the Lord."

Freedom to remarry, yes, certainly. But only in the Lord! There is the principle.

The warning of 2 Corinthians 6 is very appropriate, 2 Cor. 6:14 "Do not be unequally yoked together with unbelievers. For what fellowship has righteousness with lawlessness? And what communion has light with darkness?"

It creates a contradiction, regarding the most important aspects of life. Our marriages, and therefore are families, are to be set apart, holy, to the Lord. And we should always seek to preserve that.

Paul had to answer some specific questions, of course, in writing to the Corinthians. And one of them was that a believer wasn't free to divorce just because his or her spouse wasn't a believer. Specifically,

1 Cor. 7:12 "But to the rest I, not the Lord, say: If any brother has a wife who does not believe, and she is willing to live with

him, let him not divorce her. 13 And a woman who has a husband who does not believe, if he is willing to live with her, let her not divorce him.”

Even with that emphasis, the idea is that the marriage, the family, is set apart to God as a whole. But this issue goes deeper than just whom you can marry.

It's really about our loyalty to God. As I read,
v.4

And that loyalty to God is most clearly addressed by the practice of worship. In other words, we as God's people are to be,

B. Separated by worship.

We are called to worship God in ways that he has revealed to be pleasing to him. We are called to worship God alone, and all the sacrifices that we offer him as our worship are to be in accord with the principles he has revealed.

For Old Testament Israel, that separation was easy to define.
v.5

All of those things were the things that defined their worship, the place and time of that worship, and its object. So we, too, are called not to worship the idols of our world, whatever form they might take today. We don't worship God according to images, wooden or otherwise, but instead we worship by faith not by sight, in spirit and in truth, in the sincerity of our thoughts and hearts rather than in outward honor given to outward and external objects.

Specifically, we don't worship the way the world worships, nor

do we worship what the world worships. The world worships many idols, the idols of self, the idol of pleasure, including sex, the idol of mammon, including money, the idol of entertainment, the idol of power, the idol of sports, the idol of success. I could keep going with that list.

Symbolically, we need to destroy the altars upon which all those idols receive our sacrifices. God alone is to be the only object of our adoration and devotion. And none of those things should be able to compete with our loving devotion we we offer to God.

What sets us apart as the people of God? Well, for you, you are here today, aren't you? You have gather together with the church today rather than working, rather than watching football, rather than sleeping in.

That holiness should be reflected in the whole of your life, as well. We are to be set apart from the world. Different, Distinctive. In how you live, in how you speak. In how you relate to one another. We are to be holy, set apart in terms of the primary goals of life. And, therefore, in your willingness and eagerness to keep God's laws. We are to be,

C. Separated by life.

v.11

It is a sad observation when the lives of professed Christians are not seen to be any different from the lives of unbelievers who belong to this world. It is a sad conclusion when God's people in church don't treat each other any differently than the unbelieving people of the world treat each other.

We are called to be a holy nation, a separate and distinct

people. And I'll end by going back to Peter's words in,

1 Peter 1:13 "Therefore gird up the loins of your mind, be sober, and rest your hope fully upon the grace that is to be brought to you at the revelation of Jesus Christ; 14 as obedient children, not conforming yourselves to the former lusts, as in your ignorance; 15 but as He who called you is holy, you also be holy in all your conduct, 16 because it is written, "Be holy, for I am holy."