

What Does It Mean to be Holy?

Nehemiah 13:15-31

What does it mean to be holy? One branch within the Christian tradition uses that word “holiness” to identify themselves, usually as a “Pentecostal Holiness” church. Perhaps the most obvious and well known outward evidence might be the so-called holiness bun. A woman’s hair, tied up in a bun above her head. Is that all there is to holiness? I surely hope not!

But what, then, is holiness? I think you know the real answer, the deepest answer. Holiness means to be different. To be separate. To be distinct. To be set apart. But again, that separation is not a matter of outward external conformity to man-made traditions. Holiness is not a matter of your style of clothing. It’s not a matter of your hair. Holiness is not a uniform you wear. Instead, holiness is the demonstration of your obedience to the law.

So holiness is telling the truth, your honesty and integrity. And not stealing what belongs to others. Holiness is honoring authority, submitting to those in authority with a gentle and quiet spirit. Holiness is purity, keeping your body unstained from immorality. Holiness is obedience. Obedience to God’s law. It is the same thing as righteousness. And it must apply to both the outward actions as well as the inward motives and desires.

So as God calls his people to holiness, he defines what that means. And let me emphasize at the outset, that you as God’s people are, indeed, called to holiness. You are called to be different. You are called to be set apart from the world. That is as clear as it can be in the Bible.

1 Peter 1:14 “...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.”

Or, in Paul’s words,

2 Cor. 7:1 “Therefore, having these promises, beloved, let us cleanse ourselves from all filthiness of the flesh and spirit, perfecting holiness in the fear of God.”

Perfecting holiness! That’s our calling as Christians. And the Old Testament gives us the fullness of the sense of what it means to be distinct. Thankfully, we are now freed from the outward, ceremonial regulations that have all been fulfilled and abolished with Christ, but those ceremonial laws do serve to teach us, in principle, what holiness is all about.

Lev. 11:44 “For I am the LORD your God. You shall therefore consecrate yourselves, and you shall be holy; for I am holy. Neither shall you defile yourselves with any creeping thing that creeps on the earth. 45 For I am the LORD who brings you up out of the land of Egypt, to be your God. You shall therefore be holy, for I am holy. 46 ‘This is the law of the animals and the birds and every living creature that moves in the waters, and of every creature that creeps on the earth, 47 to distinguish between the unclean and the clean, and between the animal that may be eaten and the animal that may not be eaten.’”

So holiness means to “make a distinction.” Thus, God made his people holy when he set them apart from all the other nations of the world. And God calls his people to live out that distinction in the ordinary course of their human lives. “You shall be holy, for I am holy.” But what does that mean for us?

Most broadly, that means that as Christians, we are distinct from the world. And the focus is upon morality, moral purity. That word “morality” identifies the categories of right and wrong, good

and evil. So morality is goodness. Moral purity is doing what is right. And God is the only one who has the right to define those terms.

So what is moral purity? What is moral goodness? It is obedience to God's law!

Not obedience as a covenant of works. Not obedience as an obligation to earn or merit God's favor. Not obedience as the means to earn your salvation or to work for your justification. Obedience in that context is always a curse, because it is an impossible task for fallen men. Holiness is something far different than the foolish and hopeless attempt to obtain your own standing before God on the basis of your own good works.

Holiness is your response to God's grace. Holiness is your response to his mercy. Holiness is the expression of your gratitude for his love, it is the expression of your thankfulness for his grace. And though it is not the way in which you become a Christian, it is your calling as a Christian. "You shall be holy, for I am holy."

Let's go back to Nehemiah, and as we end our study of this book, we will look at,

I. THE PRACTICAL EVIDENCE OF MORAL HOLINESS.

There is a lot that changes from the Old Testament to New, a lot in terms of the administration of the covenant. Gone are so many of those outward, ceremonial regulations, which are labeled in the book of Hebrews as things that are "concerned only with foods and drinks, various washings, and fleshly ordinances imposed until the time of reformation."

But the basic principles of holiness haven't changed. The

moral law of God hasn't changed. The ten commandments haven't changed. And we have applications of two of those laws here at the end of Nehemiah, the practical evidence of moral holiness. Remember the broader context. The people of God were in exile, and God has permitted them to return to their own land. God has restored his people to their own identity as his people, and the city of God is being rebuilt. The temple is being rebuilt. Their identity is restored. Now, how is that made evident?

We come this afternoon to a failure on the part of God's people, a failure in holiness that is corrected.

v.15-16

What was the moral impurity of the people of Israel? They were engaged in their normal, ordinary business on the sabbath day. They were treading the winepresses. Gathering their wheat harvest. They were buying and selling their goods in the market. And how does Nehemiah respond?

v.17-18

The people of God were profaning the sabbath. They were taking God's holy day and making it common, ordinary. That's what "profane" means. Taking something special and making it common. Taking something designed to be special and making it no different from everything else.

You see, "profanity" really is the opposite of "holiness." They are antonyms, defined as the opposite of each other. And our world is filled with profanity today, not simply a certain collection of four letter words, but the misuse and abuse of those things which God has called sacred. To profane the sabbath day means that you take this special day and make it common!

Nehemiah calls that an "evil thing" in verse 17. He brings it

into the realm of morality, good and evil. And so,

A. The moral purity of holiness applies to our weekly schedule of time.

Just as God's law teaches us. The fourth commandment.

Ex. 20:8 "Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy. 9 Six days you shall labor, and do all your work, 10 but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the Lord your God. On it you shall not do any work, you, or your son, or your daughter, your male servant, or your female servant, or your livestock, or the sojourner who is within your gates. 11 For in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, and rested on the seventh day. Therefore the Lord blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy."

The Lord made it special! He made it holy. As Jesus tells us, God made the sabbath for man! It's a good thing. It is the Lord's own pattern himself, in his work of creation. God gives his people a great blessing. He gives his people a day of refreshment, a day of rest, one day each week. And it is a sign that marks his people as being separate and distinct from the world. The sabbath day is a demonstration of our holiness.

Ex. 31:17 "It is a sign forever between me and the people of Israel that in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, and on the seventh day he rested and was refreshed."

It is also a sign of God's grace in our redemption, for in the second giving of the law in Deut. 5 we read this,

Deut. 5:12 "Observe the Sabbath day, to keep it holy, as the Lord your God commanded you. 13 Six days you shall labor and do all your work, 14 but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the Lord your God. On it you shall not do any work, you or your son or your daughter or your male servant or your female servant, or your ox

or your donkey or any of your livestock, or the sojourner who is within your gates, that your male servant and your female servant may rest as well as you. 15 You shall remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the Lord your God brought you out from there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm. Therefore the Lord your God commanded you to keep the Sabbath day."

The Sabbath Day is a sign of God's sanctifying love for his people.

Ezek. 20:12 "Moreover, I gave them my Sabbaths, as a sign between me and them, that they might know that I am the Lord who sanctifies them."

Beloved, the moral purity of holiness applies to your weekly schedule of time. And though Nehemiah mentions the dangers associated with our unholiness, Scripture also identifies the blessings of holiness.

Is.58:13 "If you turn away your foot from the Sabbath, From doing your pleasure on My holy day, And call the Sabbath a delight, The holy day of the LORD honorable, And shall honor Him, not doing your own ways, Nor finding your own pleasure, Nor speaking your own words, 14 Then you shall delight yourself in the LORD; And I will cause you to ride on the high hills of the earth, And feed you with the heritage of Jacob your father. The mouth of the LORD has spoken."

Beloved, holiness is a good thing! Holiness of life brings to us the blessings of God. And sabbath keeping is part and parcel of that holiness.

There is a second example here in Nehemiah, a second demonstration of holiness or moral purity. And that has to do with the seventh commandment, and the broader area of our marital relationships.

B. The moral purity of holiness applies to our marital relationships.

The issue was certainly plain for the Israelites in Nehemiah's day.

v.23-29

Holiness meant that God's people would married only others among God's people. In the context of the New Testament, Christians are permitted to marry only other Christians. We looked at one of the chief verses for that last week,

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? 15 And what accord has Christ with Belial? Or what part has a believer with an unbeliever? 16 And what agreement has the temple of God with idols? For you are the temple of the living God. As God has said: "I will dwell in them And walk among them. I will be their God, And they shall be My people."

It's a matter of holiness! It's a matter of moral purity. And when Paul stresses the freedom you have to marry whomever you choose, he qualifies that by adding, but only "in the Lord." Why is that? Because you are to be holy. You are to be separated from the world. You are to be separate from the world, especially in that most intimate and personal of all human relationships.

And as we broached this subject some weeks ago from the confession of sin in Nehemiah 9-10, notice that this sin was a sin of the fathers! The commandment is given to the fathers,

v.25 "You shall not give your daughters to their sons, or take their daughters for your sons or for yourselves."

That's holiness! That's moral purity. That's the fullness of the

requirement of the seventh commandment, "You shall not commit adultery." God's people must show themselves to be holy by the moral purity of marrying only other Christians.

Now, the applications. As soon as you talk about holiness, you are immediately confronted with the reality that there is not one of us that measures up perfectly. Not one of you can approach the subject of holiness and come away confident your own success. We all continue to sin and fall short of the glory of God. So the practical applications of moral holiness brings us immediately to the subject of repentance!

II. REPENTANCE AND THE PRACTICAL APPLICATION OF MORAL HOLINESS.

And that's what we have here in Nehemiah. Repentance. Turning away from the sin of moral impurity. We'll look again briefly at the same two issues, the 4th commandment and the 7th commandment, holiness with regard to our weekly schedule of time and holiness with regard to marital relationships.

A. Applications of the sabbath day.

v.19-22

Such strong leadership by Nehemiah. Such an obvious solution. Just shut the gates of the city of Jerusalem, so that the merchandise couldn't be brought in to be sold. The holiness of the sabbath day would no longer be profaned.

That same call to repentance is foundation of that passage I read a few moments ago from,

Is.58:13 "If you turn away your foot from the Sabbath, From doing your pleasure on My holy day, And call the Sabbath a delight, The holy day of the LORD honorable, And shall honor Him, not doing your own ways, Nor finding your own pleasure,

Nor speaking your own words, 14 Then you shall delight yourself in the LORD.”

If you stop “going your own ways...” If you would stop “doing your own pleasure...” And, more positively, if you would “call the Sabbath a delight...” That’s what repentance is all about. Putting away the behavior that is identified as “evil.” Repentance means honoring the day as holy instead of profaning it as ordinary. Surely, among God’s people today, such repentance is often needed.

We can get very defensive, trying to explain this commandment unlike all the others. We have all our excuses. We can look to exploit all the exceptions the Scripture gives, for works of mercy and necessity and ministry. We can embrace the idea that the law is oppressive and that keeping this law is somehow automatically legalist, but in all of that, we miss the blessing of God built by his design into this very commandment, “If you...call the Sabbath a delight and the holy day of the Lord honorable...then you shall take delight in the Lord...”

At a certain level, it is that simple. For people of God, holiness is good! The law of God is good! Thankfully, we are freed from its curse. We are delivered from the law as a covenant of works, and it is now the definition of our love for God. In every case, keeping the law is a blessing. And so often, because of our sin, repentance is necessary.

So the people of God should stop buying and selling on the Lord’s holy day. Those ordinary, profane activities belong the normal affairs of the other six days. This day, this day, is a delight! This day is holy to the Lord. Then, again, secondly,

B. Applications of marital relationships.

Again, for Nehemiah, it was simple.

v.25

v.30-31

How does that apply to us? We know from the Apostle Paul in 1 Corinthians 7 that divorce is not permitted to those already married simply on this ground, so the applications are primarily to those who are not yet married. As God’s people, we are to be holy. And that means you are not permitted to marry an unbeliever, or to give in marriage your son or daughter to be married to an unbeliever. You must be holy! Nehemiah then ends with,

III. A PERSONAL PLEA.

A. A sincere plea of integrity.

It is not a matter of self-righteousness or works-righteousness. It is not a matter of spiritual pride. It is not a matter of legalism. Instead, it is a matter of integrity.

v.22b

Likewise,

v.31

It is the same thing we saw last time in,

v.14

“Remember me,” O Lord. Vindicate me! Establish me, as I walk before you with integrity. It really is a prayer that corresponds to the exhortation which Paul gives at the end of, 1 Cor. 15:58 “Therefore, my beloved brothers, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord your labor is not in vain”

When you walk in holiness, you can pray this way,
“Remember me, O my God, for good.” When you walk before the Lord with integrity, consistently, this can be your earnest and sincere plea. And that verse continues,

v.22 “Remember me, O my God, concerning this also, and spare me according to the greatness of Your mercy!”

You see, at the end, it is sill,

B. A humble plea for mercy.

Nehemiah isn’t claiming sinless perfection. He isn’t even boasting of his own holiness. Instead, he is pleading for mercy! “Spare me according to the greatness of your steadfast love.”

Indeed, it is ever and always God’s love that spares us, his covenant love, his lovingkindness. Ever and always, the blessings we receive from God are a demonstration of his grace to us. So “as he who called you is holy, you also be holy in all your conduct.” “It is written, “You shall be holy, for I am holy.”

You see, the promise of the gospel and the exhortations of the law unto holiness are not in conflict with one another, but they do sweetly comply, as our Confession of Faith expresses it. They fit together perfectly, as Nehemiah demonstrates. So in your personal practice of holiness, and in your repentance for your greatly imperfect holiness, pray with this humble, personal plea of Nehemiah,

v.22 “Remember me, O my God, concerning this also, and spare me according to the greatness of Your mercy!”