

## Set Apart

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I think I've mentioned before that I toured in the former Soviet Union in 1979, with most of my time in what is now the separate country of Ukraine. While in Kiev, I was able to tour the Kiev Pechersk Lavra, also known as the Kiev Monastery of the Caves. Though it initially appears to be a typical Orthodox Church on the outside, the name "Monastery of the Kiev Caves" hints towards the secrets below ground. Under the church is a complex system of underground corridors, caves, and catacombs. Visited annually by hundreds of thousands of pilgrims, the Monastery is one of the most famous religious centers of Orthodoxy.

The Monastery was founded by a Friar Anthony in the 11th century. He sought solitude in the quiet Ukrainian wilderness, excavating a cave within a hillside. There he lived a simple, quiet life and was eventually joined by other monks. A community soon evolved and new caves were excavated. It became a network of caves and catacombs that can be walked through even today. Measuring maybe six feet wide, and eight to ten feet high, they can feel almost claustrophobic. Along the passageways there are small grottos, perhaps six feet wide and four feet deep. An Orthodox monk lived their entire lives in this little grotto, lit only by candlelight. When they died, their coffin (with a glass top) was laid in the same grotto they spent their lives in. Solitude and prayer were the lifestyle cornerstones of their lives.

I remember looking at the little figures, covered in cloth, under the glass in each coffin. They were small, maybe five feet tall. Standing in the catacomb, now lit by electricity, I tried to imagine what life must have been for these men. Like many monks around the world, they focused on being set apart from the world in a way that seems like overkill to us, not to mention bizarre. This is how they implemented a life set apart from the world, and for God.

Is this what is expected of us? Are we to be "holy" to this degree? As a matter of fact, what does this word "holy" mean?

The Hebrew word used in the Old Testament is *qāḏôš*, which means to be of God, separate, set apart, and therefore holy or sacred to God. It is also used to refer to saints, as people set apart. In the New Testament, the Greek word *hagios* is used.

It too can refer to the saints, set aside and beloved. Here as in the Hebrew scriptures it means set apart for God, to be exclusively His. This then can have a further meaning for being sacred, morally blameless, religious, or consecrated.

Let's look at this in the context of today's passages. In Isaiah, we have the famous story of the prophet's call from the Lord, whom he saw "sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up." The seraphim, strange looking angelic creatures, were constantly proclaiming to each other, "Holy, holy, holy is Yahweh of Hosts!" They were noting the utter separateness of Yahweh, of God from all else; that He is utterly unlike anything or anyone. In fact, God appeared as so totally "other" that Isaiah was driven to despair, knowing his own sin. I've mentioned before that the "burning coal" that was touched to his lips is described as burning tar and pitch – like having hot fresh pavement touched to your mouth. But this amazing "otherness" did not burn Isaiah, only his sin. His words were made pure so that he could then begin giving his prophetic message.

So here we see how God is described as holy, set apart, utterly different. But that is not all that can be holy. In Leviticus we learn that God has made a people, the Israelites, his own: "You shall be holy to me, for I the LORD am holy and have separated you from the peoples, that you should be mine." (Lev 20:26) Israel was chosen, and we are chosen as well. As a matter of fact, everyone hearing my voice is chosen – you don't have to worry about that. I preached a number of years ago on predestination – it's really the decision that God makes about all of us out of His infinite kindness.

As we move to today's passage from Colossians, we find that it is our holiness that is being discussed. Does that feel a little strange? How does it feel to be described as "holy"? What's the picture that hits your mind? Perhaps it's the monk in the catacombs I described earlier. Or we see some sanctimonious soul, perhaps even ourselves, acting "holier than thou." (It's funny, because if you break that phrase down literally, it means that I am more set apart than you. Kind of silly, huh?)

A sanctimonious man dies and goes to Heaven. At the pearly gates, he sees a huge line of people waiting to get in. He marches right up to the front of the line and says to St. Peter, "I'm a good man, I've prayed every day of my life, and I've always followed the rules. I don't need to wait in line with these sinners."

St. Peter looks at his record and says, "Sir, you have to wait just like everyone else." The man huffs and puffs and says, "That's ridiculous! I'm practically a saint!" Suddenly, a massive, muscular man with a biker jacket and tattoos walks past the entire line and is immediately waved through the gate by St. Peter. The sanctimonious man is outraged and says, "What is the meaning of this?! How does he get to go right in?!" St. Peter smiles and says, "Oh, that's 'Biker' Dave. He died protecting an orphanage from a burning building, after spending 20 years running a homeless shelter." The sanctimonious man, with a look of utter disgust, says, "Yeah, well, I guess some people just don't have to work for their salvation."

That is so often what we look at – are we praying enough, are we not breaking the rules, the law? So Paul in Colossians tells us what really brings about holiness. He says that we have been “raised with Christ!” When Jesus died on the cross, He took your old nature (as Paul calls it) with Him. Sin in all of its lack of glory has been taken away. Yet we still fall into sin, right? Therefore Paul encourages us to think of it as something already dead, and to put it to death ourselves. We put on instead the “new self,” which was brought to life when Christ rose from the dead. So it’s not what we do or don’t do that makes us set apart – you know that Israel often strayed, but God has always brought them back. We are set apart by our new life in Christ!

When we see lists like are in this passage, talking about sexual immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire and the like, or anger, wrath, malice, slander, obscene talk, it is tempting to read this like an instruction manual. We are going to try really, really hard not to do these things! As we have spoken about before, the harder we try, the worse it gets. Paul discusses this in many places, notably in Romans seven and eight. It is instead the creation of us as utterly new that makes us holy, set apart for God. But we also see this little sentence in the passage: “On account of these the wrath of God is coming.” In this context Paul is discussing the consequences of sin, that nothing good comes from it. And remember that sin has been dealt with and no longer has influence on our relationship with God. But sin continues to have consequence here on earth. It is interesting that some manuscripts (and some of our translations) read that the wrath of God is coming “on the sons of disobedience.” Scholars are not sure if this is part of the original words of Paul or not. If they are, then it could refer to demons, fallen angels or some such.

So holiness is being set apart. What does this mean for how we live? Simply, holiness is choosing to be set apart from the world. Yes, we live in the world, but we allow our primary allegiance to be to Jesus Christ – set apart for Him. Again, we put off the old self, putting it to death. We died with Jesus, and we are resurrected to new life. Our lives are hidden with Christ in God.

But wait Mike, you may say. Those are a lot of really great words, but they are much easier said than done! Put off the old self, put on the new life, how do we do that?

I came across a rather poorly executed poem – Susan Spear would shiver in her boots to hear it:

There was an old woman from Shem.  
Upon hearing a bad word, sighed, "Amen"  
One day, sadly, choked on her phlegm.  
Her cost of holiness was death.  
Alas in heaven now with no breath!

This holy life does seem next to impossible. And without Christ, it is absolutely impossible. With Christ, it becomes our very nature. How? By faith. We are set apart from the world through faith. We are holy by faith. And as scripture tells us elsewhere, it doesn't even have to be our faith. It is the faith of Jesus Christ, not just in Jesus Christ that is in operation. When our lives do not look holy, we trust by faith that Christ has made us holy. That's what we focus on, not on our sin. This is the bedrock of Christian living. We trust that Jesus has given us His righteousness, that is, His perfect ability to live apart from the world.

So what does this do for us? Well, it sets us free. When we are not consumed by what is wrong with us, but with what Christ has made right in us, we no longer have to strive, to work so hard. Instead of being captive to sin, entangled with the world, we can focus on who we are in Christ. Do we mess up? Of course, because we are only human, and though we shall one day be like Christ in every way, we are still in process. We are still carrying around this bucket of skin, bones, organs and fat! And that can tether us to the world around us. But we are given the hope of something more. We know that Christ has redeemed us.

So what does Paul mean when he says not to set our minds on things of the earth? To put to death what is earthly in us? We look to what our lives truly are. We are free because Christ has set us free. And so, rather than spending “brain time” on these awful things, we can focus our minds on “things that are above.” And when we do, when we transform our minds into this kind of thinking, the deeds will follow. Not only will we have no interest or time for the things of earth, but we will also have all the time for what comes out of the love of God – all good things of the kingdom of heaven, that we break out in the middle of the earth.

Just remember what Christ has done for us. We sometimes use the rather religious word “sanctification” to describe it. In essence, what Jesus did is given to us as our nature, and we therefore get the advantage of His holiness, given to us. Isaiah was a foretaste of this – his guilt was taken away, his sin atoned for. Thank God that we don’t have to kiss hot pavement to do so! We instead are gifted this state, this status by God through the work of Christ. So go forth in good works, because you can focus on them, not on the enslavement of the world.

Can I hear a “Hallelujah?” Praise the Lord!

Amen.