

*The Committed Life*  
**1 Thessalonians 2:10-12**  
John Breon

Fred Craddock tells about a girl he went to high school with. She belonged to a church that emphasized how Christians are different. The women were not to wear makeup or jewelry. They couldn't cut their hair. They could only wear long skirts and long-sleeved blouses. Fred said it was kind of painful seeing those girls come to school looking like their own grandmothers. But one girl broke away from the group. She went into the girls' restroom and rolled up the waistband of her skirt until it was the same length as everyone else's. She opened the collar of her blouse and rolled up the sleeves. Then she put on some eye shadow and lipstick and pulled back her long hair. She came out of the restroom looking like everybody else. Then, in the afternoon, when the bell rang to go home, she went in there and came out looking like she was expected to look in her church and in her home (*Craddock Stories* 95).

Several of my relatives belong to the Church of God (Holiness). Some of them went there when they felt that the Methodist Church was abandoning its proper emphasis on holy living. Historically, many of the churches called "holiness" split from or grew out of the Methodist movement. It's a strong part of our heritage. John Wesley's mission statement and that of the early American Methodists was: "To reform the nation/continent and to spread scriptural holiness throughout the land."

But how do we get past a restrictive and burdening view of holiness and get into what C. S. Lewis wrote about when he said, "How little people know who think that holiness is dull. When one meets real thing, it is irresistible" (*Letters to an American Lady*)?

We're exploring core values of the church in terms of six "streams" of Christian faith and life. We've seen the Word-Centered Life, the Spirit-Empowered Life, the Compassionate Life, and we've talked about God in all of Life. Today we're looking at the Committed Life.

Richard Foster calls this the Virtuous Life and the Holiness Stream. The focus is on having our hearts reformed and developing "holy habits."

Holiness is the ability to do what needs to be done when it needs to be done. The word "virtue" means to function well (*Streams of Living Water* 61, 82). I call it the "committed life" because that seems an easier way to capture what we mean by virtue and holiness. But we do need to remember that it's the work of God in us and not just our own effort that makes us holy.

There are dozens, maybe hundreds, of Scriptures that speak of holiness and sanctification. To be holy means to be separate, set apart as belonging to God or for God's service. To sanctify something means to make it holy. In the OT, the temple and the various articles used for worship and sacrifices, as well as the sacrifices themselves, were holy.

People can be holy as well. At the heart of both the Old and New Covenants is the call to be God's people, to belong to God, to be set apart to serve and worship God. Leviticus 11:44-45 summarizes this: "I am the LORD your God; consecrate yourselves and be holy, because I am holy. ...I am the LORD, who brought you up out of Egypt to be your God; therefore be holy, because I am holy." 1 Peter quotes this and applies it to the church: "...as he who called you is holy, so be holy yourselves in all you do; for it is written, 'Be holy, because I am holy'" (1:15-16). Peter goes on to describe the New Covenant people as a holy priesthood and a holy nation (2:5, 9). Holiness means belonging to God and living like we belong to God.

Jesus spoke of the blessing of the pure in heart, who shall see God (Mt 5:8). He told his followers to "be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect" (Mt 5:48). In his prayer for his people the night before he died, Jesus spoke of us being in the world but not of it and he asked the Father to sanctify us by his word (Jn 17).

The book of Hebrews includes this challenging word: "Make every effort to live in peace with everyone and to be holy; without holiness no one will see the Lord" (12:14). Holiness has to do with our relationship with God and it's tied to our relationships with each other.

You can find references to holiness, sanctification, and commitment in nearly all of Paul's letters. While we could use any one of these texts, I want to turn to 1 Thessalonians to hear God's call to holiness.

Paul reminds the Thessalonians of how he and Timothy and Silas behaved when they were with them. He uses parental images to describe their witness and work. He says they were gentle like a mother nursing her child (2:7). Then he says, "You saw how holy, upright and blameless we were with you." We dealt with you like a father with his children, urging and encouraging and pleading that you lead a life (or walk) worthy of God, who calls you into his own kingdom and glory.

God calls us to be saved and so to be his people. Then, as God's people, we're to have a lifestyle that's consistent with being the people of God. We're the people of God because of God's call and because we've put our faith in Jesus Christ. Now we need to live like what we are. We're to walk worthy of God.

God calls us into his own kingdom now. God wants us to live under his rule. This means making God our priority—seeking first the kingdom of God and his righteousness. It means committing ourselves to Jesus as Lord. It means listening for God's call and doing what he says, going where he leads. It means living in ways that reflect God's kingdom of love, righteousness, justice, and peace.

God also calls us into his future glory. The kingdom is both now and not yet. We live now as people who belong to the future fulfillment of God's reign. We have the hope of living forever in the glorious presence of God. We will see his majesty and live in his eternal light. This hope leads to holiness. "All who have this hope in him purify themselves, just as he is pure" (1 Jn. 3:3).

John Wesley said that when we talk about salvation we're talking about holiness of heart and life ("The Character of a Methodist," *Works* 8:341, sec. 4). Holiness is both inward and outward. It's both personal and social.

Personal holiness relates to purity, devotion, commitment, loving God. It also has to do with good works, service, loving our neighbor. A nurse in the psychiatric ward of a Veteran's Administration Hospital was almost overwhelmed by the demands of caring for her patients. Someone asked her, "Doesn't this ever depress you?" She replied, "Not really. If I ever begin to feel depressed, I remember that I may be the only person who

cares what happens to these men. And then comes the strength and patience to keep going, to keep loving them" (Maxie Dunnam, *Our Journey: A Wesleyan View of the Christian Way* 65).

Social holiness has to do with the church, our fellowship with each other, and our accountability to each other. We don't live our Christian commitment off by ourselves somewhere, but in fellowship with other Christians. Social holiness also has to do with the world, with culture, with systems in society. We're called to engage the world with the good news of Jesus, to make a difference, to be used by God to help transform the world.

John Wesley provides examples of this. In a moving passage in his *Journal*, he tells about a snowy day when he walked around London in snow to the tops of his boots, going door to door asking for money for the poor. Wesley opposed slavery all through his ministry. One of the last letters he wrote was to William Wilberforce, a Member of Parliament who was fighting to make the slave trade illegal. Wesley wrote, "Go on in the name of God and in the power of his might, till even American slavery (the vilest that ever saw the sun) shall vanish away before it" (Dunnam 66).

In Jesus' prayer for his people in John 17 we see two things about disciples: we belong to God (that's holiness) and we are in the world (this is where holiness is lived out). Reuben Welch writes,

I think many of us have a kind of built-in understanding that true discipleship or holy living should be lived out in an unreal world. I think we think that if we really were as holy or as disciplined or as committed as we ought to be, *our lives would be out of this world!* (*We Really Do Need to Listen* 128)

He goes on to say that he could be a better Christian if his house were arranged differently. He'd like to sit in the living room and read the Bible and be holy. But the TV is just in the next room and it's hard to be holy in the living room when just over there the TV is on and, besides that, it sounds so interesting sometimes. So he goes in to see what's going on and an hour and forty-seven commercials later, he says, "I'm not as holy as I was before!" He could go be holy in the kitchen, but the refrigerator is

there. He could go be holy in the bedroom, but the bed is there. Have you ever been praying and then woken up with a crick in your neck? He describes several other places (the freeway) and things (including his dog) and people in his life that make it hard to be holy. Then he concludes,

When it comes right down to it, holiness means *God-centeredness*, *Christlikeness*, and *God-sentness*. And that's the prayer of Jesus for us. In the midst of all this, we are in the world, sent to the world. And if I'm going to be a person that puts God at the center of my life and proclaims God to the world, I'll have to do it with the rooms of my house arranged the way they are. I may even have to learn to like my dog! I may need to learn how to accept the intrusion of people around me to whom I want to shout: **WOULD YOU PLEASE LEAVE ME ALONE SO I CAN BE HOLY?!** Turn it off! Take it away! I want to pray! No! The word of the Lord comes to us: **In the world! In the world!** To which we say, "Yes, Lord!" (143-144)

Like Jesus, Paul tells us that God gives us his Holy Spirit so we can live as God's holy people right where we are in this world (1 Thess 4:3, 7-8). We could think of hundreds of examples of how the church seeks to influence the world with the gospel, to bring holiness to unholy places, to be used by God to restore even a little bit of the world to what God intends. We're called to be part of that.

We're never alone in living this commitment. We're part of the people of God, the Body of Christ, the fellowship of the Holy Spirit. We are the church. And God promises us the power to live as God's people, to live God's way.

Toward the end of 1 Thessalonians, Paul says, "May God himself, the God of peace, sanctify you through and through. May your whole spirit, soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. The one who calls you is faithful, and he will do it" (5:23-24).

The God who calls us is the God of peace. In the Bible "peace" means more than just the absence of strife. It speaks of salvation and wholeness—which is another description of holiness.

The God who calls us is faithful. God is true to his own nature. God is consistent. God's Word represents his character. God keeps his promises. God will do what he says. He will sanctify us. He will fulfill his purpose of making us holy.

God works in our lives to enable us to be what he intends and to do what he wants. We have responsibility—because God is at work in us we can work and we must work. Saving faith will always lead to works of love.

Salvation or holiness is for our whole being, our entire personality. Paul prays that God will sanctify us entirely. Then he mentions spirit, soul, and body. These are not three separate parts of a human being. The Bible has a holistic view of human personality. To speak of spirit, soul, and body refers to the entire person. Some preachers say, "You are a spirit, you have a soul, and you live in a body." That's not correct. You are a unity of spirit, soul, and body. Without any of these we're incomplete. And God wants us to be whole.

The Christian life is an adventure, a journey toward wholeness. We can bring our brokenness to Christ and know that he heals and restores and works in that brokenness to lead us closer toward his purpose for us. And someday the process will be complete, all the brokenness will be mended, we will be complete and "we will be like him, for we will see him as he is" (1 Jn. 3:2).

The invitation is to be God's person, be the people of God. Pray something like this: "Lord, as far as I know my own heart, I want to turn to you with all I am. I want to be fully committed, fully devoted to you. I want to be yours—forgiven and cleansed, empowered and equipped to serve. Holy Lord, make us more holy."