

## Holiness

*“Be holy, because I am holy” (1 Peter 1:16).*

God is holy. His holiness is His transcendent, infinitely perfect moral nature. It’s His effulgence, His glory, His goodness, beauty, love and justice all together being expressed in the single word, “holy.” His holiness is His character. His holiness is too extreme, too vast for any mortal even to understand what it is. Yet we’re commanded to be holy as He is holy! “But just as He who called you is holy, so be holy in all you do.” Huh?

How are we holy? Obviously, not in the same sense as God is holy. Holiness for us means we’re not profane, common, vulgar. We’re not sinning, nor rebellious, nor worldly or selfish. We’re not proud, nor greedy, nor envious, nor any of the things on the many vice lists that appear in the New Testament. In other words, we live in such a way as to conform to God’s perfect character and His perfect will. We’ve been called to resemble God!

This means we’re to be different from others in the world around us, who don’t know God. We’re to be morally pure, with a distinct set of values and ideals and a commitment to God and His will that no unbeliever can understand. Yes, we are holy in a participatory sense, that is, the Holy Spirit indwells us and so makes us holy. But that’s not what Peter has in mind. Peter really intends for us to actually be holy in our character and lives. How is that possible?

Attending church services on Sundays doesn’t make us holy. Neither does reading the Bible or saying prayers. Passive belief doesn’t make us holy. What does? I think that the best way to understand biblical holiness is to look at the “Holiness Code” in Leviticus.

At the center of Torah are the several chapters that expositors call the Holiness Code. These are mainly Leviticus Chapters 18-20. They are a unit because they begin and end with the same phrase, “I am the Lord your God . . . keep my decrees and laws.” In literature this pattern is called *inclusio*, or “book-ends,” and it demarcates a unit. Leviticus 18 deals mostly with sexual sins, and Leviticus 20 deals mostly with punishments for those sexual sins. This pattern suggests chiastic structure. Leviticus 19 has various laws that have to do with justice, personal integrity and, mainly, loving others.

What’s remarkable, indeed, *extraordinary* about this text is, the way to be holy is to obey God. Once more, because this is big: Holiness is obeying God’s revealed (written) will. “Without holiness, no one will see the Lord” (Hebrews 12:14). Let’s emend that: Without *obedience*, no one will see the Lord.

This is not legalism. This is not “works” salvation. This is Bible! And it’s not just Old Testament. We obey God not for merit nor to exalt ourselves, but out of love for God. We obey the teachings, instructions and commands of Jesus because we love Jesus. We want Him to be exalted in our lives and by our character. We live as Mary said, “My soul (my being, my life) magnifies (exalts, glorifies) the Lord” (Luke 1:46). We do that by obeying the Lord’s revealed will. We obey the New Testament Scriptures, the Word of the Lord. That’s holiness.

Let’s not be deluded. It’s easy to *suppose* something is true when in reality, it isn’t. Supposing that we have forgiveness of sins and guaranteed entrance to heaven when we die without having to be or do anything else but believe in Jesus (whatever we suppose “believe” means) isn’t biblical. Obedience is *enjoined* upon a follower of Jesus.

Now, what exactly does this mean in real life? Three things: (1) We need to know God’s will. That means reading and reflecting on a text, verse by verse, maybe even word by word. This takes time and effort. Being a Christian isn’t easy! (2) We need to think carefully, deep and long, how the text should be applied in our life today. We need prayer to do this, by the way, so that the Holy Spirit aids us in making His Word relevant. If we take the Scriptures seriously, if we take God seriously, we’ll do this, although this too takes time and effort. (3) Information, mere knowledge of the Word isn’t enough. We need to actually make the Word of God come alive. We need to live it. That’s obedience. That’s holiness.

There’s more. The active, deliberate pursuit of obedience, of holiness, defeats evil. It participates with God in His cosmic conflict with evil. And obeying Jesus exalts the Son, another of God’s creational purposes. Let’s not be smug about our religion, about our spiritual state. Indifference is not an option. If we’re grateful to Jesus for what He’s already done and will yet do for us, and if we love Him, we’ll be faithfully obedient. We’ll be holy unto the Lord. That glorifies God, which is why we’re here.