

The Holiness Condition

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For generations, many people have grown up hearing the word holiness as part of their Christian identification. In some churches, like the Free Methodist Church, that designation seemed at times to eclipse the very calling to be Christ followers. During a big part of the 20th century, it became nearly synonymous with behavioral expectations. We were the holiness people, marked by many restrictions designed to signal a heightened spirituality and devotion to God. Sadly, these restrictions often became the essence of holiness. Then legalism crept into the fiber of many churches. The idea of “holy” and “holiness” was avoided by Christians and by many became best known as a synonym for antiquated rules. The very thing we thought defined us was elusive.

Gradually, the realization grew that behaviors are not the essence of holiness. Furthermore, holiness is not a doctrine; it is not a lifestyle; it is not an achievement. Holiness really transcends all of these things, but includes them. Holiness is something we pursue and also live. The last 20 years has brought a deepening commitment to the essence of holiness and unity that transcends denominational walls. Even though it was always somewhat present in many churches, it had become a concept equated with legalism and restrictions. It is gradually being recovered as many in the Wesleyan Holiness stream of God’s Church are leaning into a fresh understanding of this Scriptural theme – and it grows.

Holiness is a condition of the human life that reflects the nature of a holy God. Many other themes of Scripture represent an action of God toward people. God atones for our sin, God’s mercy expresses God’s patience toward us, God’s justice addresses the disparity among us, God’s grace compensates for our deficiencies. But Holiness is not among those. It is not something God does to us or for us. Rather, Holiness is innate to the nature of God. It is a description of God’s own being. As such, it is not something we may control, apply, or even define. It is so completely beyond us that we may only describe it as “other.”

When humankind was created in God’s own image, holiness was part of our being as well. We reflected the One who formed us. Living in close proximity with God – walking in the garden together, as a mirror we reflected God’s nature very well. However, by exercising our power of choice combined with our sense of individuality, we chose to assert our will in a selfish decision that had deep ramifications. God said, “my will is that you not eat the fruit.” Humans said, “we know better and choose to eat it anyway.” As a result of that selfishness we were expelled and proximity with God was broken. Being separated from God like that meant people were no longer able reflect perfectly the One who created us. The mirror became distant and disoriented from God. Our lives could no longer reflect God’s holy image. The image in us was marred and distorted. So, you see, selfishness is really the essence of sin; separation is the result, and brokenness is how it shows up in our lives.

Yet, because God loves us with never ending love, God took responsibility to initiate a path for us to be brought back into close proximity. We call that being redeemed. Just like at the pawn shop, we are bought back by the One who first owned us. Jesus became God's singular and perfect "way" whereby people may "come to the Father." (John 14:6).

That journey back into proximity is always available, but it only begins by our choice. Just as a selfish act of our will broke proximity with God, a selfless act of our will restores proximity. The first Adam made a choice: "not THY will but MINE be done" and by that we are all born into brokenness. Jesus, the second Adam also made a choice: "not MY will but THINE be done" by which we may come back into proximity with God. The singular act of our will is not to do more or try harder to live up to rules, behaviors, or even Christian doctrine. It is simply an act of surrender. Then we become "people of The WAY" which is salvation.

Once the life of selfless choice begins, our trajectory turns us back toward proximity with God. We call that repentance. Actually, that trajectory begins even before a willful decision to place faith in Jesus. Wesley called it "prevenient grace." It is grace that woos our hearts to give attention to God's ways even before relying on Jesus. That trajectory is possible only because of Jesus and we walk that path daily helped by God's Holy Spirit since we don't have the ability to do it by ourselves. Pretty soon, walking that Way of salvation begins to take effect in our life. As it does, the reflection of God's holy nature begins to be restored within us. So you see, holiness is not something we do, because it is not a doctrine or behavior. Holiness is something that begins to be reflected in us as we are brought back into closer proximity with God through selfless surrender. God's holy nature becomes more visible as we reflect God more clearly. When you are in someone's proximity, that can happen. We begin to reflect those who are closest to us so when we hang out with a holy God, we will become holy as God is holy.

There is a reason why we are unable to define holiness. It is an indefinable characteristic of the ineffable God. We see only the effects of holiness in the Bible. Sometimes people are holy, or places are holy. Sometimes God makes things holy, other times people are the agents. The human mind takes what seems to be confusing and attempts to define, contain, describe and apply it as holiness. But holiness is untamable. It is indefinable. It is not just different, it is "other." It is so far beyond us that we may never grasp or define it. We may only participate in holiness as we allow a holy God to be reflected in us through a life of selfless surrender.

So you see, love motivated God to create us to be close and again it motivated God to reach out to bring us close again. Trusting the work of Jesus and relying on the help of the Holy Spirit is the only way for us to come back into proximity with God. Our only act is to choose selflessly to surrender. As we are brought back closer to God, our nature is eclipsed by the holy nature of God whom we reflect.

This also has huge ramifications to our mission in the world. We are not here to convict people of doctrinal error or behavioral differences. That job is the Holy Spirit's. We are called to invite

others into closer proximity with God through Jesus. We do it by our words, our actions, and behavior which are a natural reflection of God's nature and priorities "leaking" out of us.

Because we increasingly reflect the nature of God who is "other" we are not simply set apart as a holy bubble in isolated sectarian living. Remember, God's love compelled Him to take responsibility for our brokenness and separation. If we are reflecting God we too will feel compelled by love to go after all of creation that groans under the effect of being apart from God. That includes people in whom the image of God is marred, blurred, and broken because they live so far from God and no longer reflect God. This is why we do not rest until the whole world hears of Jesus who is the Way back to God. We do not exclude the people who are most different from us. We reach to them; we look for them; we engage them; we include them.

Holiness is not ours to define nor is it ours to show off. It is not a code of behavior requiring compliance. It is not a doctrine to learn. Holiness is the nature of God. We pursue God and we reflect God's holy nature. When we willfully allow God to live more fully in us, we will reflect God's nature more fully. That is holy living. I call it Masterful Living...

Hand in hand, the father and daughter walked through Vatican Square and into St. Peter's Cathedral. Winding their way through the halls of the great structure, they finally stepped through an inauspicious door and were reverently ushered into the small but impressive chapel. A hush fell over the group they walked with, and every head turned upward.

No need to say anything. This was the Sistine Chapel. Everyone knew this was the ceiling that drew visitors from around the world. It was one of the most important sights the two had wanted to see. They found a place in the middle of the chapel where they could admire it all. Heads upturned, the father showed the daughter the beauty of this masterpiece. "Look at the hues. Notice the shape of the figures. See the strokes and complexity of the whole ceiling." He helped his daughter appreciate good art. What better place to do it than in this place and under this work. "Notice the reach of God's hand. See the look on the man's face." The father was focused completely, fueled by his daughter's rapt attention. He ran out of descriptors and came to an end of his pointers. By his words, he invited her to see all the details of the work he had studied in anticipation of their visit. Now it was just silence. Reflection. Letting the images do their work.

At the end of silence, she voiced a quiet question. "I wonder what kind of person created art like this?" Unpretentious, without presumption and not expecting any real answer, the daughter voiced the natural question that came to her. In stunned silence, the father knew in that moment that she had captured the genius of this masterpiece.

She had witnessed the work. She had appreciated the artistry, the craftsmanship. She had seen the detail and considered the colors and strokes. She had looked at the art but seen the artist. In that moment, the father knew the art had done its work. It had invited the curiosity of his daughter to see the artist in the art. She got it.

What kind of person indeed would pour himself into such work? What kind of personality did this work reveal? How did this art reflect the nature of its creator? In her simple question the father knew was the clue to understanding masterful art. It wasn't the delicate features of the product. It wasn't the nuances of the colors. It wasn't the details of the strokes. All that was wonderful. But that was just the outcome.

What made this piece truly masterful was the way the nature of the artist was present in the art. It reflected someone whose life was poured into its colors and shapes. It was full of that person. It was an extension of the creator for those who had eyes to see. And his daughter had eyes to see. In her question was the clue to understanding the holy life. It isn't the behaviors of a person, nor doctrine well-spoken. That is the outcome. Rather, it is the way the nature of a holy God is present in the person – a reflection of the artist in the art.

The father thought of the image above him. The artwork became secondary now. In his daughter's question, the father found with new humility the key that made this masterful. Not simply because it was good, but because it was full of the master who had created.

God reaching to touch His creation; a man striving to touch his creator. Into that humanity God pours Himself as a crowning creation. Those people bear His image. They may yet reflect His holiness. Though marred through selfishness, their capacity to reflect the Creator remains. God can bring alive again the vibrant reflection of His being in the people who yearn for that touch – people reaching to once again reflect the holiness of the Master. Longing once again to be full of the Master – and be holy as He is holy.

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