

Leviticus 19:1-2, 9-18
February 20, 2011

South Plains

The Burden Of Holiness

On most Tuesdays I meet several other Presbyterian ministers to talk about our sermons for Sunday. I never fail to get good ideas. But, when I announced the title of today's sermon, "The Burden of Holiness," someone immediately responded, "Why not The Joy of Holiness?" However, my guess is that most of us hear the words from Leviticus more as a burden than as a joy: The Lord says to Moses, tell my people this, "You shall be holy." Holiness can be intimidating.

Richard Lakes told me a story about a mutual friend of ours who was asked to say a prayer before the start of a high school basketball game. He prayed for a clean game with no injuries and then asked God, "Give to the referees the wisdom to which they are not accustomed." Being holy at a basketball game is not easy for players, coaches or referees. If we are honest, most of the time in life we strive first to win; we strive second to be liked which often means to conform; and only last do we strive to be anything approaching holy.

So, I can imagine Moses standing up before the people of God and saying, "God says, 'You shall be holy.'" Only to have some smart aleck in the front row yell, "How? How can I be holy?" That's a serious question. How is it practically possible to be holy without

being unrealistic and completely out of touch with the rest of a rough and tumble world? It's fine to talk about the joys and blessings of holiness, but we spend much of our energy looking for happiness, not joy; looking for material prosperity, not heavenly blessings; looking to have fun, not to be holy.

We get some help understanding Leviticus when we realize that holiness does not simply mean moral goodness or even ethical uprightness. Morality is important, but doing the right thing is not the essence of being holy. The primary meaning of "holy" is dedicated, set apart from the humdrum of everyday life, different from the ordinary. The Ark of the Covenant was holy. The tabernacle and later the temple was holy ground because it was set apart for the worship of the Lord. The basins used by the priests, their robes and even their underwear were different and thus considered holy. Or, more properly, God called them holy and that is what made those things different from the ordinary.

To make a "thing" holy is comparatively easy. But, how do we make people holy? How does a person become really devout, or devoted wholly to God? I have to say that if that were the sole responsibility of the church, I would have quit in frustration long ago. I would have been disqualified for Christianity myself, much less for ministry.

Thank God the church is only the helper. The real work is accomplished with Holy Spirit energy in lives

where God's grace can run rampant. Holiness is finally a gift. It is a gift, however, that is never forced upon us. No one ever becomes holy against his or her will. No one was ever called 'devout' by accident when what that person really chose was to be against God.

For me, the bottom line question is not "how shall I become holy, but Why?" What's wrong with the way we are already? That's a question we struggle to answer over and over in a hundred ways. Why be different from a consumer culture that likes us to spend and buy more than we need? Why call attention to ourselves by rearranging our schedule to make time for worship? Why turn the other cheek when everyone expects us to strike back and, indeed, most people will applaud us for taking revenge? Why be different?

I still remember that one of the most painful parts of my teenage years was the comparison between my clothes, bought on sale at Leggetts Department Store, and the clothes of some other kids whose parents outfitted their children at expensive shops. Conformity was the rule and nobody wanted to be the oddball. Today, the rules have changed, but the pressure to conform still exists. Why be different?

A long time ago, William Law wrote a popular book with the forbidding title, A Serious Call To A Devout And Holy Life. In one chapter he addresses the problem of why there are not more holy Christians. His answer is brief and to the point: not many people ever intend to be

holy. Without a compelling reason to be holy, no one will ever intend to be holy.

One reason for being holy is summed up in the refrain repeated after each commandment in the 19th chapter of Leviticus: "I am the Lord." Under the right circumstances, that works. I've used the same line with a slight variation with my children. "You will take out the trash because I said so and I am your father." That's the appeal to ultimate authority; and the words have a nice ring to them. Unfortunately, when I said those words they persuaded me more than my children. They may get the job done, but there's not much enthusiasm or a sense of having made their own choice. When we obey the Lord because we believe we have no choice, there's a battle inside between what God wants and what we really want. We're conflicted; sometimes with crazy consequences. In an attempt to look or feel holy when we really don't want to be holy, we may even hurt other people.

Another reason surely implied in the refrain, "I am the Lord," is the covenant obligation between the people of Israel and God. You and I have that same relationship. As the people of God, we are his people, the sheep of his pasture; and God is the good shepherd who cares for his flock. Because God has saved us, the appropriate response is obedience. We owe him that much. A sense of obligation is a powerful motivator, and rightly so. We may become holy, and we may even

become enthusiastically holy because we believe we ought to be.

The deepest joy, however, is reserved for those who seek holiness because they want to be holy. In one corner of our souls we may obey the commandments and may devote ourselves to Jesus Christ because we feel like we must. That's OK. In another corner of our souls, a little more expansive than the first, we may be different from the rest of the world out of sense of obligation. That's better than being motivated by fear with no awareness of freedom. But, in the largest corner of our being, we seek holiness because we want holiness, we want God's holiness for ourselves.

"You shall be holy" is both an imperative command and an indicative statement about the future. Instead of hearing those words as a command, we can hear them as a promise. We will be holy because our God is holy. The character of God's people will eventually reflect the nature of our God. You know, the longer I live, the more I see the ways I am like my parents. I love words the way my father did. I'm stubborn about finishing some tasks the way my mother was. With a little more time and grace, my personality and character can and will reflect not only the character of my parents, but also the character of God.

Fundamentally, this is the meaning of "I am the Lord!" Whatever our character reflects, that is our god. When our lives are oriented toward God's promises, we

find that the qualities of love and freedom take root and grow until they entwine themselves around every decision, every experience and even around every suffering.

I've been reading a biography of Dietrich Bonhoeffer. As you may know, Bonhoeffer was a pastor in Germany during the Second World War. Sooner than most Germans, he recognized the evil that was Hitler's Nazi regime. Eventually, despite his deep Christian faith, Bonhoeffer became an accomplice in the plot to assassinate Hitler. He was found out and imprisoned for months until in April of 1945, only weeks before the Allies liberated his prison camp, he was hanged for treason. His fellow prisoners report that he was generous and cheerful throughout his imprisonment. When the guards abruptly opened the door and announced, "Prisoner Bonhoeffer, get ready to come with us," they knew it was his death summons. As he prepared to leave, he pulled aside a British prisoner of war who was to survive to tell his story; he said quietly, "This is the end. For me the beginning of life."

I think the holiness Bonhoeffer realized at the end of his life was more than doing the right thing all the time, more than being good. We cannot make ourselves holy. Holiness is a gift from the One who is holy, a promise of the presence of God. We will not wake up one day and realize, "Now, I am holy," because it is an undeserved gift, the promise of salvation. And, that is joy indeed.