

“In Christ”: Recovering the Beauty of Holiness
Ephesians 1:1-8
11.12.17



Reflection questions... [please consider the teaching notes, first, as a basis of your reflections]

“What do you think of when you hear the word, ‘holy’? How about the word, ‘holiness’? Why do you think that holiness is such a loaded word in religious circles?”

“As we live and function amongst a culture which often demonstrates divergent values and ethics, Jesus prayed that we would be ‘in the world, but not of the world’ (John 17). What do you think he meant by that? How might we demonstrate such a posture in our lives?”

“What do you boast about? Where do you turn for comfort?”

“Why do you think Paul begins with our identity (as ‘chosen’; ‘holy’; ‘beloved’), instead of our behavior? Calling us ‘holy’ when we don’t particularly act holy... isn’t that all just false affirmation? Isn’t that some lame attempt at manipulative flattery?”

“If our idols are essentially the ‘work of our own hands’, what kind of gods are we making? Out of what are we constructing them? Where do you keep them?” At work? In the garage? In the stock market?”

“What’s in your hand? What are you holding onto? What is the desire promising? What is the lie, here?”

“What happens if you finally get everything your heart desires and you’re still not satisfied?”

Teaching Notes...

I’ve been curious to see how the trajectory of our faith has been so profoundly impacted by our continued responses to those (2) deeply reflective questions.

‘boast’- shine; take pride; put confidence in; persuasion [win the favor of another; strive to please another; to induce another to believe you] [Jeremiah 9:24; Ephesians 2:9; 2 Corinthians 10:17; Galatians 6:14; Philippians 3:4]

“How do we show up? When do we sense favor? What are we leaning on for support? Whose opinion matters? Who are we trying to win over? Why aren’t we believable?”

Whether or not people ‘believe’ in God, we are always trying to ‘justify’ ourselves; not necessarily our

actions, to validate our existence; to prove that we matter. When we can't come up with an answer which satisfies our own deep dissatisfaction, we conclude that we're just taking up space. We either commit to a new "life coach" and ratchet up our efforts, or we give up, altogether, not just on ourselves, but on life itself.

Which begs the question: *"How are we comforted? To whom or to what do we turn when what we are boasting about (trusting in) proves unreliable?"*

It must, as some level, fail you. It must either leave you so deeply dissatisfied that you would voluntarily seek another source or leave you feeling so powerless and debilitated that you have no other recourse but to abandon your way for something less self-destructive.

Genesis gets us off to a "good start". It centers us in the creative, generative love of God. It establishes "blessing" as the framework for all of life. It creates context for understanding our world, ourselves, our God. It's home.

It is "good", but suspicion called it all into question. Our questioning hampered our ability to trust. The absence of trust resulted in alienation. People alienated from life, from truth, from wisdom, make some really sincere, albeit self-destructive choices.

So, the resolution is "not" about forging a new way forward, or an alternate destiny, but a "return", to the "ancient paths".

"This is what the LORD says: 'Stop at the crossroads and look around. Ask for the old, godly way (good way, and walk in it. Travel its path, and you will find rest for your souls'. But you reply, 'No, that's not the road we want!'" Jeremiah 6:16

We, unavoidably, run into these big, theological expressions: "holy" and "holiness". Qadowsh - *sacred; set apart; devoted; wholeness.*

To identify God as holy is to identify his "God-ness".

Holiness is *everything about God that distinguishes him and makes him worthy of our singular devotion.*

Holy is an expansive word because it attempts to describe transcendence. The "other". It connects to that deeper place in us that intuits that life is somehow "more than" than our rate of advancement, and our net worth, and our number of Twitter followers, given the additional characters!

Holiness offers us a glimpse of who we were meant to be and the kind of life that we were meant to experience and honestly confronts all of those attachments which obstruct our pursuit of such a life.

Holiness, in religious circles, comes with a great deal of baggage. It takes something beautiful and wonder-full and narrows it down to a laundry-list of God-etiquette. It creates images of self-righteousness ("holier than thou"), and polarization. It not only creates distance between ourselves and others, but, unwittingly, between us and God.

The Story continuously insists upon a continuity between who God is (holy) and the kind of people who we are becoming (holiness).

Let's face it, this idea of holiness anticipates that our lives will be different; distinguishable--- not in sectarian or self-righteous ways, but in beautiful and inviting expressions of God-like character-

-- ways that are recognizably establishing the order of God and making him both attractive and available.

Before we are ever called to be good, we are called to be holy.

“Holy” is a way of helping to describe, first and foremost, what God does IN and FOR us and not something we do to secure the label.

Paul’s favorite designation for those who are finding life *“in Christ”* is *“holy people”* (*“saints”*). When we use that terminology, we recognize that there is something about our present circumstance, relationship in and with Jesus, which is directly altering our present approach to life.

“Be holy because I am holy” (1 Peter 1:16; Leviticus 20:26) God doesn’t say, *“Try to be holy as I am holy”*--- he wants us simply to allow our present arrangement with him (accepted/loved) to compel us toward a lifestyle that’s in keeping with who we really are.

You can only rightfully pursue holiness from a place of holiness.

I have discovered that we dare not even talk about holiness as a lifestyle until we become convinced of holiness as an identity. Until we have had some experience of grace (of unprovoked love), we will be unable to hear the call to righteousness. Until we have come to know (experience) love, holiness will always feel like something we are trying to ‘attain’; like some void or discrepancy we are trying to rectify instead of an identity, out of which, we are being summonsed to live.

“Holy” requires us to deal with God as he reveals himself, not as we imagine him to be. God is never simply a projection of our own imaginations and, therefore, never limited by our lack of understanding or experience.

Without an accurate image of God, we will never offer our devotion and, in the absence of a God worthy of our devotion, we will be forced to look elsewhere for something/someone to which we might attach our hearts.

1 John 5:21 *“Dear children, keep yourselves from idols.”* (*“...keep away from anything that might take God’s place in your hearts.”* NLT)

John has just finished an exposition of a life lived in vital union with Jesus. He’s not simply saying, “Oh, yeah... keep away from idols.” He’s saying that it’s life’s most basic question: ***“Has something other than God captured your heart and earned your trust?”***

Idolatry is not an antiquated notion, practiced only by the unsophisticated, but the tendency, within us all, to ***attach our hearts to something other than God; looking to something/someone other than God for life.*** It’s never about the object itself, but the power/authority that we attribute to it.

Admittedly, few of us would imagine ourselves dancing around carved images or sacrificing the family pet on some ‘make-shift altar’, in the backyard, but we would have the tendency to attach our hearts to things which we rather naively believe will offer us the fulfillment that we desire.

All attachments/idols have this in common:

First, they all make promises that they can’t keep. They are all dependent upon good branding and marketing strategies.

Second, they result in self-destruction and then offer themselves back to us as the solutions (i.e. more money, a different sexual partner, a stronger drink).

Proverbs 23: *“When will I wake up so I can look for another drink?”*

Habakkuk 2:18-19

“What have you gained by worshiping all your man-made idols? How foolish to trust in something made by your own hands! What fools you are to believe such lies.”

You’ll know you are ready to displace all of these attachments so that you can be loved more by God and love others more fully when you are able to make the declaration found in Isaiah 44:20...

“What I have in my hand is a lie.” This is the welcome of grace. The loosening of the grip on all that you have been holding onto for life, dearly.