

GROWING UP INTO LOVE; “TO ALL THE SAINTS”, Pastor Phil Strong

Text: Ephesians 3:14-21

April 3, 2016



Growth Questions

“Me? Holy? Isn’t this some lame attempt at manipulative flattery? Why does the notion create such inner-tension? How does the connotation of such a moniker seem to cause us to resist the label?”

“Is what I am currently pursuing a healthy and realistic means of fulfilling my desires? As a result, am I becoming more restful and at ease with who I am in Christ or more determined to prove another wrong about me?”

“How much of your activity (pursuits) would you say is motivated by your fear of not being loved? How much of it is motivated by the fact that you already are?”

Teaching Notes

In the rear-view...

~ Paul implies that we are “*our best selves when we are with Christ*”. He demonstrates how God is consistently offering us the “after picture”, then, working backwards to all of the relationships, responses and practices which allow us to live into such a reality. It is God’s way of saying, “*Here’s who you are. Here’s who I see you becoming. Now, grow into this.*”

~ Paul clearly highlights “ **blessing** ” as God’s fundamental framework for life: “*the good that someone has decreed; to cause to flourish*” and “*the divine reason/plan*”. It is the life of God (goodness) flowing tangibly through his people.

~ We established, as central to the Story, the “holiness of God”--- **everything about God that distinguishes him and makes him worthy of our singular devotion** .

The best way to ruin a good song is to be trapped in a moving vehicle (particularly a ‘Smart Car’) with someone who is ‘tonally challenged’ and who is convinced that **sheer volume** is the remedy to any glaring deficits. By the same token, the best way to tarnish ‘holiness’ is to reduce it to a laundry-list of moral permissions and prohibitions--- “do’s” and “don’ts”, instead of the beauty of belonging with and belonging to our good, Creator God.

Paul’s favorite reference for addressing his readers is “ **holy people** ” ... “ **saints** ”. First, it ‘startling’; it immediately catches us ‘off-guard’. Second, it creates a certain level of dissonance as we find it conflicting with our present way of understanding ourselves with God.

First of all, “*saint/holy one*”, is a moniker that we would rarely, if ever, attach to ourselves and likely not a phrase we would utilize too often as a means of describing those seated around us today.

The connotation is of one who has accumulated enough ‘pious stats’ to support the votes by the nominating committee [someone to whom we turn for help in finding our car keys--- St. Anthony of Padua--- or someone who has spent significant time in a third-world country].

“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.

2 Timothy 1:9 *It is God who saved us and chose us to live a holy life. He did this not because we deserved it, but because that was his plan long before the world began -- to show his love and kindness to us through Christ Jesus.*

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

Any consideration of holiness cannot begin with our behavior, because if we begin with our behavior, ‘holy’ becomes a title that we attempt to secure instead of an identity into which we are beginning to live. I would suggest that this is a breeding ground for inauthenticity and hypocrisy.

“Don’t handle. Don’t taste. Don’t touch. Such rules seem wise because they require strong devotion and discipline, but they provide no help in conquering a person’s evil desires.” Colossians 2:21-23

Paul says that such regulations do have some value in minimizing the damage that we do to ourselves and to others, but they can’t reach deep enough--- into those places where our identity and significance and passions are being formed.

‘Holy’ never refers to us as we are, except in relationship with Christ.

The phrase that Paul uses most often to provide both the motivation and the means of such a reality is “*in Christ*”.

The word “in”, means ‘to be closely associated with or identified by’; ‘to unite with something in order to form an indistinguishable whole’ [*“in debt”, “in despair”*... when we use that terminology, we recognize that there is something about our present condition/circumstance which is directly altering our life]. Therefore, when we say that we are “*in Christ*”, we are being identified with him and by him in ways that are not only distinguishing him, but us, as well.

The desired outcome is not the holy life itself, but to “know” (experience, relate to and interact with) love.

Interestingly, the word “saint” means, not only, “*pure, clean*”, but “*warmed by tender love; cherished*”. There is an intensely relational quality to the word.

I have noticed a particular “ease” that characterizes people’s lives who have been “loved well”. If, early and often in our development, we are identified **with** and **by** that love [by people who were supposed to love us and whose opinion matters most to us], it helps prevent us from demanding it or performing for it, and we find that we are able to receive others well, because we are not requiring anything more of them in order to merit our love. Interestingly, “salvation” is most often described as or equated with rest.

Know that your pursuits are always linked to your desires, but, they are not synonymous.

Desires--- what our hearts truly want; that for which they long. Those desires can be healthy or unhealthy; orderly or ruinous.

Pursuits--- the means you choose of realizing the fulfillment of my desires; what you will give yourself to in order to satisfy your longings.

If your pursuit doesn’t match the longing, you are destined to futility and fatigue and frustration.

Pursuit of your job: was it for the fulfillment of being able to best utilize your gifts and abilities to contribute in meaningful ways, or to validate your career path to your parents?

Marriage: was it for the beauty of the shared-life and the growing in love to better reflect God’s desires in us and for us, or so that you might be needed by another; to fill-in-the-voids of your own depleted life?

Insecurity in our lives is the inevitable result of trusting the wrong things; things that cannot possibly offer your heart the stability it requires. So, when we are trusting other human beings to establish our identity and worth, it either: forces us to perform [you have to maintain that pace for the entire race] or, it drives us “into the bushes” to conceal who we really are.

If I neglect God as the source of the securing-love that only he can provide, I will...

... resort to irrational measures of getting people to notice me.

... compromise what is most real and most essential about who I am in order to secure your endorsement.

... employ ‘drivenness’ as both a means of achieving success and of camouflaging the gaping void of significance in my life. The real challenge with ‘drivenness’ is that we live in a culture that actually celebrates and endorses our striving as resourcefulness and initiative.

It means that in order to have any realistic possibility of flourishing, we must ‘cast off’ every other label, every other means of identifying ourselves and understanding our worth, which would de-value us and de-sensitize us to love! Paul is attempting to “**re-train**” us in blessing. To help us understand ourselves, not in terms of how others view us or even how we feel about ourselves, but about how God views us. **Holy**.

1 John 4:18 “...*perfect love dispels all fear*”.

Any area of your life that demands that you perform, posture, and achieve is being motivated by fear and not love. Completed love leaves no space for such insecurity.

If, by any means, you decide that your relationship with God is contingent upon your performance, you lose your glory and so does God! **Why?** Because what is most glorious (significant, weighty, essential) about God is that he IS love. What is most glorious about us is that we are the *be-loved*.

“A healthy, emerging relationship with God will always result in a greater awareness of your own brokenness and need to be made right; which will, in turn, develop in you a lingering appreciation for God’s love for you and a desire to give yourself to him completely, considering no other options.”

This is not some amateur attempt at bolstering your self-esteem, but a sincere effort at establishing your identity.

The objective of holiness is never simply the awareness of our own sin and ruin, but to provide an invitation to something different--- something better. Holiness says that our brokenness is not the most real thing about us anymore. Love is. Transformation is.

It says that God’s primary work in us is not condemnation (simply pointing out all of our deficiencies), but restoration--- lovingly dealing with all that’s gone wrong so that we might be made right.