

# HOLINESS TO THE LORD

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*Presented at Trinity Community Church, San Rafael, California, on Sunday, May 2, 2010*

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## Life After the Fall

We may think life really changes after you finish high school, or after you fall in love, or after you marry, or after you have children, or after you retire — but the greatest life-change has already taken place for all of us; it was the change that happened after the fall of Adam and Eve.

Genesis 4

<sup>1</sup> Now Adam had sexual relations with his wife, Eve, and she became pregnant. When she gave birth to Cain, she said, “With the Lord’s help, I have produced a man!”<sup>2</sup> Later she gave birth to his brother and named him Abel.

When they grew up, Abel became a shepherd, while Cain cultivated the ground.<sup>3</sup> When it was time for the harvest, Cain presented some of his crops as a gift to the Lord.<sup>4</sup> Abel also brought a gift—the best of the firstborn lambs from his flock. The Lord accepted Abel and his gift,<sup>5</sup> but he did not accept Cain and his gift. This made Cain very angry, and he looked dejected.

<sup>6</sup> “Why are you so angry?” the Lord asked Cain. “Why do you look so dejected?”<sup>7</sup> You will be accepted if you do what is right. But if you refuse to do what is right, then watch out! Sin is crouching at the door, eager to control you. But you must subdue it and be its master.”

<sup>8</sup> One day Cain suggested to his brother, “Let’s go out into the fields.” And while they were in the field, Cain attacked his brother, Abel, and killed him.

I have a comment that is completely off subject, so let me get it out of the way now: all religions are not the same. Cain offered his crops to God; Abel offered his flocks. God rejected one gift and its giver and accepted another. From God’s perspective, ancient religious practices among men were valueless *unless* they prefigured His plan of salvation and helped to prepare people to recognize His Son when He came and the superior value of His sacrifice. The whole orderly system of bloody animal sacrifices and offerings and feasts that He prescribed for the Jewish people was designed to point to Christ. Ethics and social relations are byproducts of religion, not its essence.

Man’s perspective, as we well know, is often very different and generally self-serving.

More to the point of today’s lesson, Cain felt painfully rejected. He became angry and dejected. Compassionately, God spoke to him: “Why angry? Why depressed? (As if to say, “Examine yourself and consider your ways. Why do you choose to react like this?”)

What follows are two of the most significant lessons of human psychology you will ever read: (1) If you do the right thing, you will feel good about yourself (literal Hebrew: *will there not be a lifting up* [of your face]?). (2) If you do not do the right thing, sin will seek to take advantage of you and capture you, but you must overcome it.

Cain failed the test. His lack of emotional self-control is the very human weakness that sin exploits. While we are raging or sobbing and justifying our behavior, sin is settling in and taking away the controls of our lives. It happens so frequently, that we have assumed that we have no control.

But we do! The outcome of your life is not predetermined — by God or genetics — it is determined by the many choices you make — both small and large.

God's mercies are new every morning. Each day when you wake up is a fresh start and your chance to make better choices, with God's help.

"The fruit of the Spirit is... self-control" (Galatians 5:22-23). This is not control *by* self, but control *of* self by the Holy Spirit. It is the result of *His* activity in you.

This means that God's Spirit has come into your life to help you regain control of those areas you have lost to sin. The Holy Spirit has come to you to make you holy.

Some of you won't let yourself agree with that, because you think "holiness" means moral and spiritual perfection — something far from your experience. Your self-evaluation is not incorrect, but your definition of "holiness" is unbiblical and misleading.

"Holiness" has two essential meanings. With respect to God, it means *wholeness* — self-existent completeness, thorough integrity and consistency.

With respect to humanity, "holiness" means wholly dedicated or belonging to God. Since He invites us to come to Him (give ourselves to Him) just as we are — scuffed and worn, dirty and broken — our condition cannot prevent His owning us. If we continue to give ourselves to the Lord Jesus Christ and pursue His will — no matter how scuffed again or broken again — He will continue to receive us and claim us as His own and call us "holy."

One day, we will indeed be complete, as He is, and thoroughly integrious and consistent. But until that day, we cannot prove our holiness to anyone, we can only accept it by faith for ourselves.

1 Peter 1:13-16

*So roll up your sleeves, put your mind in gear, be totally ready to receive the gift that's coming when Jesus arrives. Don't lazily slip back into those old grooves of evil, doing just what you feel like doing. You didn't know any better then; you do now. As obedient children, let yourselves be pulled into a way of life shaped by God's life, a life energetic and blazing with holiness. God said, "I am holy; you be holy."*

God is holy. It is His very nature. It is essential to His character.

We "shall be holy" also, as a direct result of His influence, for holiness is caught, not taught.

But we are presently "slaves to sin," with respect to our flesh. This is likely not news, but it is significant to note that we are fellow prisoners with the likes of the great Apostle Paul

Romans 7:14

*The trouble is with me, for I am all too human, a slave to sin.*

If Paul said this of himself, how can we claim anything else?

Enter (literally), the Holy Spirit.

Ezekiel 36

<sup>25</sup> *"Then I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you will be clean. Your filth will be washed away, and you will no longer worship idols. <sup>26</sup> And I will give you a new heart, and I will put a new spirit in you. I will take out your stony, stubborn heart and give you a tender, responsive heart. <sup>27</sup> And I will put my Spirit in you so that you will follow my decrees and be careful to obey my regulations.*

Holy Spirit is so uniquely qualified to effect this change in us: He is God; He is holy (it's His name!); He dwells within us.

John 14

<sup>15</sup> *"If you love me, obey my commandments. <sup>16</sup> And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, who will never leave you. <sup>17</sup> He is the Holy Spirit, who leads into all truth. The world cannot receive him, because it isn't looking for him and doesn't recognize him. But you know him, because he lives with you now and later will be in you.*

Today we would say, "Then, with us, but now, *in us*." He has come to live within us, in order to transform us into the likeness of Jesus. We all must make good choices, but choosing the right is not enough.

The world is full of "powerless deciders" — people who repeatedly choose to redirect their lives to do better, but who lack the necessary power of lasting self-control to make it work. Their is a "see-saw" of ups and downs, fits and starts. We *must* have the power of God working within us to make our choices effective and lasting.

Holiness means "dedicated to God," "set apart for exclusive use." It is a matter of *whose we are*.

Holiness is *first* a nature (as Jesus said, "You must be born again"), then an attitude (what Paul described as "the renewing of your mind"), and then, finally, behavior. We cannot get to it by changing behavior first. Changed behavior without a changed heart is pretentious holiness — a cause for greater self-centeredness.

The march toward holiness is a process of surrender(s), yielding our will to the Lord (the Spirit). Theologically, this transformation process is called sanctification ("saint-ified"). Yet we are *called* "holy" immediately, in Christ. This is the prerogative of God who redeemed us, and calls what is not as though it already were. It signifies His purpose for us, our destiny in Christ.

The Holy Spirit becomes our Guide to holiness, from the inside out.

Isaiah 30

<sup>19</sup> *O people of Zion, who live in Jerusalem, you will weep no more.*

*He will be gracious if you ask for help.*

*He will surely respond to the sound of your cries.*

<sup>20</sup> *Though the Lord gave you adversity for food and suffering for drink,*

*he will still be with you to teach you.*

*You will see your teacher with your own eyes.*

<sup>21</sup> *Your own ears will hear him.*

*Right behind you a voice will say,*

*"This is the way you should go,"*

*whether to the right or to the left.*

<sup>22</sup> *Then you will destroy all your silver idols and your precious gold images.*

*You will throw them out like filthy rags, saying to them, "Good riddance!"*

Isaiah wrote, "You will hear a voice *behind* you," but we would now say, "You will hear a voice *within* you, saying, 'This is the way, go here, do this.'"

Just as when you steer your car, sometimes there are major turns, but most of the time just slight adjustments. Even on a straight road, due to its surface, or the wind, or the balance of your tires, repeated slight adjustments of the steering wheel are necessary. So in life, though the "road" may appear straight, the Holy Spirit will frequently prompt necessary slight adjustments of mood or behavior to keep us in line with Christ.

The choices remain ours to make; all the Holy Spirit can do is guide and influence and restrain behavior. Paul calls Him "He who restrains" (2 Thessalonians 2:7), indicating His general assignment to restrain evil, whether in us or in the world at large. If He did not do so, who can imagine what we would be like? What do you think would have become of you if you had freely followed every evil notion you have ever had? Shudder to think!

No, we are not perfect or complete in our transformation, yet God has set His love on us and called us "His own."

<sup>1</sup> John 3

<sup>2</sup> *Dear friends, we are already God's children, but he has not yet shown us what we will be like when Christ appears. But we do know that we will be like him, for we will see him as he really is.* <sup>3</sup> *And all who have this eager expectation will keep themselves pure, just as he is pure.*

One day, our transformation will be complete. And that is because the Holy Spirit has come to dwell in us and will never cease to prod us toward holiness.