



**Sunday, 24 April 2022**

**Called to be Holy – 1 Peter 1: 14-16.**

Good morning. Today we're continuing our series of studies under the title, "Called to be...". Basically - we're looking at what our life as a Christian ought to consist of. Or if you like, the way we apply our faith as a follower of Jesus the Christ in our everyday lives. Or you could think about it as the ingredients of discipleship. But whatever we call it - it has two elements - first *knowing* how we should be living - and then - the hard bit - *doing it*. And I think that for this morning I've picked up the tab on what might be the hardest of the subjects we'll be considering - 'Called to be holy'.

We'll see that 'called to be holy' is a command from God in both the old and new testaments (and we'll look at where God commands that in a moment) - but first we can't be something that we don't understand what it is. So I want to begin with a question - and I'd like you to take a few moments to discuss it amongst yourselves, and then we'll see what sort of answers we can come up with. The question is "What does the word 'holy' mean?"

So - if you'd like to get into small groups with those immediately around you for just a few moments to ask yourselves, 'what does the word 'holy' mean?'

[PAUSE, DISCUSS & RESPOND]

I won't confuse you with the Hebrew or Greek most of the Bible was originally written in, but I will just say that the Hebrew word in the OT and the Greek word in the NT, both have the same meaning for the word 'holy'. It's uniformly understood to mean, 'apartness' or 'separate'. Or put another way, you could say it means 'uniquely and distinctly one-of-a-kind totally different with nothing else to compare to it'.

One Bible commentator says that it is the definition of "the godness of God". I'll go along with that, because everything we label as 'holy' we do so only because in some way it is related to God. So when Moses is told to take off his shoes before the burning bush in the desert because he's standing on holy ground, it is nothing to do with the ground itself being anything special, but just that the presence of God is there. The same is true with Joshua before Jericho. And it's precisely because of an association with God that people talk about, for instance, the 'Holy' Bible, or maybe a premises or site being holy, or even maybe people as 'holy'. But I'm getting ahead of myself.

Because first I wanted to take you to two important places in the Bible that define the fact that it is supremely and distinctly God Himself who is holy. And the first is in the OT. It's Isaiah 6:1-7. This is what it says:

*In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord, high and exalted,*



*seated on a throne; and the train of his robe filled the temple. Above him were seraphim, each with six wings: with two wings they covered their faces, with two they covered their feet, and with two they were flying. And they were calling to one another:*

*'Holy, holy, holy is the Lord Almighty;  
the whole earth is full of his glory.'*

*At the sound of their voices the doorposts and thresholds shook and the temple was filled with smoke. 'Woe to me!' I cried. 'I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, the Lord Almighty.'*

*Then one of the seraphim flew to me with a live coal in his hand, which he had taken with tongs from the altar. With it he touched my mouth and said, 'See, this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away and your sin atoned for.'*

I could actually have stopped that reading at verse 3 - but I wanted to read on for a reason I'll come to later. Because verse 3 says, "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord Almighty; the whole earth is full of his glory."

Fast forward more than 600 years to the last book in the Bible, and we're with John on the island of Patmos. Now I don't need to say too much about John's situation because we were recently looking at Jesus' messages via John to seven groups of Christians who lived in modern day Turkey. But in Revelation chapter 4 we find John transported in a vision into heaven where he sees a throne, and - surprise, surprise - around it four supernatural creatures. And this is what he hears them say: "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God Almighty, who was, and is, and is to come." So we find a consistency through the record of the Bible defining God as awe-inspiringly holy.

A. W. Tozer was a pastor, theologian and author of the last century. One book he wrote was called 'The Knowledge of the Holy', and he had some very telling things to say in it. For a start he says this: "It is my opinion that the Christian concept of God in these middle years of the twentieth century is so decadent as to be beneath the dignity of the Most High God, and to actually constitute for professing believers something amounting to a moral calamity". Basically he's saying, we've totally lost an understanding of who a Holy God is. And it's my opinion that things haven't got any better since he wrote that, but in fact, worse during my lifetime. So the *first* thing we need to do this morning is consider what we know about a Holy God before we can understand how we are supposed to live a reflection of Him and 'be holy'.

And one thing that saying God is set apart - separate - means is that He is everything we are not. And by implication that means we're not even in a



position to understand what 'holy' means. We're not equipped for sure a process. Not unless.... God... from His side of the separation... reveals it. Which is why something Jesus said is so significant. He says in Matthew Ch.11 - "...no one knows the Father except the Son and those to whom the Son chooses to reveal Him." So we have to rely on divine revelation to be able to know anything at all about the true Godhead - and all those who try to do it any other way, some by creating their own Theology (and many have) end up producing a false religion. But I'm getting a bit ahead of myself again.

Because - as I've said - one thing that is implicit in defining God as awe-inspiringly 'separate' is that He is not like us. If God is holy, we definitely are not. If holy is the definition of the 'godness of God' that can't be anything to do with us, can it? Which is why the next thing I've got to say should have a bit of a shock factor in it for us.

Leviticus probably isn't your most favourite book in the Bible. It's a book full of regulations. It's rather reminiscent of a Union Rule Book in the heyday of trade union power around the time I started work. Very hard going. But it does have some gems in it. For instance, in chapter 11 and verse 44 it says, "*I am the Lord your God; consecrate yourselves and be holy, because I am holy.*" And in the next verse it says again, "*Be holy because I, the Lord your God, am holy.*" The Israelites were told directly and explicitly to 'be holy'. But just how can they do that?

Leviticus was probably written thirteen hundred years, give or take a few, before Jesus walked the earth. After Jesus had returned to heaven, the Church began to grow and spread. It was a difficult time for them, as our look at Jesus messages to the Turkish Christians showed us a short while ago. And during that time a lot of their encouragement to live as they should came from some mature experienced Christians in the form of letters.

So Peter writes this in the first letter we have from him in 1 Peter 1:14-16: As obedient children, do not conform to the evil desires you had when you lived in ignorance. But just as he who called you is holy, so be holy in all you do; for it is written: "Be holy, because I am holy." He's picked up the command in Leviticus and relaunched it as God's command to the NT Church.

So in spite of knowing the seriousness of what 'holy' is, and all that that implies, we, fallen humanity, are commanded to be holy ourselves in both the OT and the NT! Now do you see why I say we should feel a sort of reverberating shock from this statement? Or have we become so immune by familiarity with scripture to fail to be affected by it?

Perhaps something that will help us at this point is to hear another comment



from A W Tozer. I certainly found it useful. He compares the holiness of our awesome God to the command for us to also be holy - and he said this:

"God is Holy with an *absolute holiness* that knows no degrees. *This* unique holiness He cannot impart to His creatures. But there *is* a relative holiness that He shares with the angels in heaven - *and* with redeemed humanity on earth as their preparation for heaven. *This* holiness God can and does impart to them - input *into* them - because He's made it available to them by the blood of the Lamb." And then he tellingly adds, "He requires it of them".

He requires it of us. Which is why it's a command in the Bible. But Tozer then helpfully points something else out: "When God said, 'Be holy because I am holy'", He didn't say, "Be as holy as I am holy", because that's a total impossibility - absolute holiness is God's alone. But - we *are* still told to 'be holy' - and nowhere does it say this is a different standard of holiness - a sort of lesser second grade holiness. So we've got a bit of a problem. And our first problem is that we're sinful human beings.

Isaiah certainly felt the shockwave of God's holiness in the reading we had earlier from Isaiah Ch.6. He *'saw the Lord, high and exalted, seated on a throne; and the train of his robe filled the temple. And he heard the living creatures calling to each other: 'Holy, holy, holy is the Lord Almighty; the whole earth is full of his glory.'* His reaction. *The recognition that he wasn't holy at all. He self-identifies that like this: 'Woe to me!' 'I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips'.*

Tozer also refers to Isaiah's experience of the awesome living God, and makes this observation: "He (that's Isaiah) expresses the feeling of every person that discovers themselves under their disguises - and who has been confronted by the inward sight of the holy whiteness that is God. Such an experience cannot but be emotionally violent". He goes on to say that we need such an experience to shake us out of our comfortable way of life that we quite happily go along with provided nothing too much comes along to shake us up - but we'll come back to looking at ourselves a bit later.

As for Isaiah, God has an answer for his problem. God met him in his recognised need. 'Then one of the seraphim flew to me with a live coal in his hand, which he had taken with tongs from the altar. With it he touched my mouth and said, 'See, this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away and your sin atoned for.'. God in effect took away his inability to be holy.

Fast forward to the NT, and when Peter reiterates God's command for us to be holy, he actually doesn't need to spell out what has taken away our guilt and made atonement for us. He's talking to a church who knows that Jesus died to take their punishment, and was raised from the dead to provide that reassurance - and I trust that I'm talking to people who also know that - or



even just aspiring to 'be holy' will be out of reach for you. So if you haven't accepted Jesus as your Saviour from the power and consequences of sin - you need to stop and do that before you do anything else. Because the rest of what I'm saying won't be much use to you otherwise.

Note that Peter not writing a 'how to' manual on being holy here. He does tell his readers not to conform to evil desires and the pattern of their pre-Christian life - and he and others have given further guidance elsewhere.

But down the centuries - some people made up their own 'how to' books on holiness. So for instance, some people advocated differing degrees of severe self-denial, while others advocated celibacy as a route to living best for God. All these ideas were put forward as routes to obtaining holiness. But these practices, even with the best intentions, exemplify attempts, as it were, to pull ourselves up by our own boot laces. There are of course some things we *do* need to exclude, and others include, in a lifestyle set on being holy - but extremes of self expressed self-denial in any form to get God's attention is not in that menu. In the OT, when Elijah contested with the prophets of Baal on Mount Carmel, Baal's prophets took the idea to another level - dancing around cutting themselves thinking self-harm would please their god. Not so our God, the God and Father of the Lord Jesus the Christ.

But this does still leave us with a question we have to answer if we are to obey God's command to "be holy, because I am holy". *How* do we obey His command to be holy - we who are totally unholy in our natural selves - because holiness is part of who God is - and not what we are?

Well since holiness is intrinsically the manifest of the character of God it must mean that we have to 'put on' His character in our lives - live by His ethics - and put on His personality, as it were. And since the only example we have of that being done perfectly by a human being is the example of Jesus Christ, then it follows that if someone says that we ought to be Christ-like, they are basically saying 'we ought to be holy'. But again - how?

Unfortunately, my skiing days are now far behind me. And even if I had the energy for it, I'd be very scared that the inevitable falls that go with this activity would, at my age, break a few bones. But that's not half as scary as this!



This is a photo from a paralympic downhill event, and the rear skier here is blind - or virtually blind. So he has to trust implicitly the directions of his Guide just ahead of him, and do *exactly* what he's told. And I suspect that he didn't



get to this point in his sporting career without some mishaps along the way. And we will have them too - as we - as it were - 'follow blind' our unseen God and do what He says. You see you just can't obey the instruction 'to be holy' by going it alone.

I think I've mentioned before to some people an experience I had a long time ago that happened while I was on my way to work. I worked most of my working life close to Acton Town station, so I was on the Piccadilly Line on my way to work and was just passing under the Western Avenue and pulling into Park Royal station when I distinctly heard God say to me, "All I ask is that you do what I say.". Now that might mean that we will hear directly from God specific instructions from time to time which He will be looking for us to obey, even if we can't see where it's leading us, like our blind skier. But we *already* have a lot of His instructions (and praise the LORD they're available to us in our own languages and without anyone saying we shouldn't read them) so that doesn't have to be the case. But don't rule it out. Mine and others personal histories are peppered with examples of hearing directly from God - and too many and varied to say it's just our imaginations.

So you could say as a sort of broad overview statement, 'Being holy is being the person God wants me to be'. But a question that still leaves us with is, what should walking through life in sync with our distinctly different God look like in us? Or in the terms of our subject this morning, "What should 'holiness' in us look like?"

Can you stand a little more brain work? Just for a few more minutes, can you get back into groups and see what you come up with in answer to that question - "What should holiness look like in us?" Remembering of course, I'm not speaking of us going it alone in this, but doing it with God's enabling.

[PAUSE, DISCUSS & RESPOND]

Going right back to the beginning - the Bible tells us we are made in God's image. That's doesn't mean the He has hands with fingers and thumbs and feet with five toes - because the Bible also tells us - God is spirit.

The image of God we were originally created in is to do with inner character and personality. It was basically holy and could relate closely to the Godhead. But God, in creating us, also gave us something else in our nature - the ability to choose. And He offered us good things to chose - but we blow it - and decided - with the free-will He'd given us - to chose bad. And I'm afraid in that short statement you have the whole record of human history by and large. And if you don't believe me read tomorrow's newspaper

We've just celebrated Easter. The time when God wiped clean the slate of



the record of our past failures (if of course we'll turned from chasing after those things, repenting of them, and accepted Him as saviour.). But it was also the time when He opened the door of fresh beginnings and new possibilities. And within the territory of these new beginnings is a reaching out to be what we were originally designed to be - which is holy. Or as Paul in one place puts it - replace our old clothes of disobedience with new garments provided by God - a new set of characteristics that are God's own. And most of the discipleship teachings in the NT are in effect a clothes catalogue illustrating what these holy garments we need to put on look like.

Which is why it was at this point in this morning's talk I was going to start listing some of these items - starting with the fruit of the Spirit. A bit obvious that - the fruit of the Holy Spirit. He's the third person of the Godhead - so they've got to be holy characteristics, haven't they? Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. And then I'd have followed with more like them.

But if I'd finished up down that road this morning - which I'm sure could have been useful - I'd have been short-changing you - *even* moving away from our subject. And that's because I would have been missing the fundamental point. I'd have been, in effect, putting the cart before the horse.

All the characteristics we're encouraged to exhibit as Christians have to be the outward expressions of our inner self. They're only symptomatic of something else - and that's our relationship with the living holy God. So being holy - in a nutshell - is all about seeking God *Himself*. Which is why I was perhaps a little bit hard earlier when I sort of put down people in past centuries who'd espoused techniques of self-denial as a route to holiness. Their motivation was often to remove from their lives everything that could distract from the task of 'finding God' and going deeper with Him.

But where do we start on this journey of seeking to know our Holy God. Not now just attempting to practise the manifestations of Christianity alone, but to seek God *Himself*. Well - in one sense - we've already on that journey (those of us who have Jesus as our Saviour and are already related to God the Father that is). A bit like pilgrim in John Bunyan's 'Pilgrim's Progress' we are already on the road to the celestial city. But there *are* a few a things that can help us on our way. They're not are easy. And none can be done without the help of the presence of the eternal God.

And the first is probably the hardest. We have got to hate sin. I mean, *really* hate it. Paul wrote in Romans 12:9 "Hate what is evil. Cling to what is good". And then a bit further on in v.21, "Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good". I've got those two verses printed out and taped to the side of my computer monitor. Perhaps you need to print them out too and put them where they will be useful for you to regularly see them.



Do you remember the teaching we had a while ago on the armour of God. Keep the shield of faithfulness to God handy - and use it. You cannot, absolutely not, 'be holy' and tolerate known sinfulness in your life. They don't mix. Oil and water doesn't come into it. Yes - we will sin. The Bible recognises that. But we mustn't habitually live in a way that tolerates it in our lives. That's worse than keeping a dangerous unpredictable pet in your home.

I'm not an American Football fan. I'm not a football fan come to that. But in American football I understand they have something called 'time out'. You can stop the game for a break - then pick it up again after a period. But I've recognised in my own life I was living like that - taking time out from holiness by not resisting temptation and the like - then trying to restart it by returning to being obedient to what I knew all along was right. That sort of practice might be within the rules of American football - but it is definitely *not* in God's rule book! There is no 'time out' from obediently seeking Him and His Kingdom - *not* if you want to be holy.

That's the negative. But the positive is best expressed by Jesus Himself when asked about the most important commandment. His answer recorded by Matthew, Mark and Luke was: "Love the Lord your God with *all* your heart and with *all* your soul and with *all* your strength and with *all* your mind". Seeking God is not a part-time hobby - it's a full time occupation.

And Paul - ever practical - expresses how to do that in Romans 12:1 & 2. Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God **B** this is your true and proper worship. Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is **B** his good, pleasing and perfect will.

And in one sense we've come full circle. Proverbs 9:10 says, **A** "The fear of the LORD (or if you prefer, the awesome realisation of who God is) is the beginning of wisdom". To get to both where Paul wants us to be in Romans and to live the first and greatest commandment of Jesus' statement, we need to be standing alongside Isaiah in Ch.6 and saying "woe is me, I'm undone". We need to admit how unholy we are - then let God undo the unholiness.

And in this we have to start where we are - wherever that is on the journey of our Christian life right now. And the resource God has given us to help us on this journey is prayer.

Anselm was an Archbishop of Canterbury way back in the eleventh century. So more than 900 years ago. One thing he left us was a prayer he wrote. There's an abridged version that's quite useful to use at the beginning of any quiet time of Bible reflection or prayer you might be having - but I'd like to draw our service to a close this morning by reading his longer version:



O Lord my God.  
Teach my heart this day  
where and how to find you.

You have made me and re-made me,  
and you have bestowed on me  
all the good things I possess,  
and still I do not know you.  
I have not yet done  
that for which I was made.

Teach me to seek you,  
for I cannot seek you  
unless you teach me,  
or find you  
unless you show yourself to me.

Let me seek you in my desire;  
let me desire you in my seeking.  
Let me find you by loving you;  
let me love you when I find you.

That - I submit to you - is the prayer of someone seeking a deeper relationship with the living holy God to the end that they might live their lives in true reflection of His holiness. Someone who is sincerely seeking to fulfil the command - "Be holy, because I am holy".

*Granville Richards.*