

Preserve my soul; for I am holy: O thou my God, save thy servant that trusteth in thee. Psa 86:2

Holiness is a topic that you don't hear much about, but when you do, it's normally a mangled and utterly embarrassing bunch of nonsense. It's a subject that is perhaps confusing and difficult to understand when you first consider it. When modern preachers attempt to address the matter, it becomes a muddled conglomeration of denying our natural depravity and works-righteousness. I heard a supposed preacher at the Super Bowl repeatedly say to people that "you are holy creations of God who must do holy things to prove God right". What holy things? He never said in my hearing, unfortunately. I've had discussions with Catholics where they deny the culpability of the Pope in their (never forget ongoing) pedophilia scandal because he is the "holy father and not capable of being unholy". Ridiculous and breath-taking. These are just two examples of what I mean by "mess". It isn't Scriptural and it isn't helpful.

I've remarked a few times lately in private conversations that I think understanding who and what we are is increasingly crucial at this hour. The growing chaos, the open promotion of violence and sinful behavior in every venue, every facet of life consumed with iniquity makes this question seem more and more rhetorical:

Luk 18:8 "...Nevertheless when the Son of man cometh, shall he find faith on the earth?"

It feels more and more like there is no one else in the world seeking the glory of God in any way, which should spur on our efforts to do so with increasing focus and desire. Looking to our conversation and all that we do, focusing more and more on how to best represent our King and differentiate our behavior from the world's – not just different to be different, but different in our service and different to a purpose. That includes understanding holiness, because we are called to it:

1Pe 1:15-16 "But as he which hath called you is holy, so be ye holy in all manner of conversation; Because it is written, Be ye holy; for I am holy."

I say **we** are called to it because Peter is not talking to the world in general, but to:

1Pe 1:1-2 "... the strangers scattered throughout Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia, Elect according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, through sanctification of the Spirit, unto obedience and sprinkling of the blood of Jesus Christ"

He's speaking to people he believes through experience and knowledge of their conversation to be like him – elect of God, called to this holiness, not people who look at their sins and call them holy.

So what is this holiness that Peter calls us to? That's what I want to explore today.

Let's start with the word itself. What does 'holy' mean?

To understand the concept, let's start with the fact that Peter says "it is written" which of course means he's referencing the Old Testament, so our search should start there. It is commonly accepted that he's quoting Leviticus:

Lev 11:44-45 "For I am the LORD your God: ye shall therefore sanctify yourselves, and ye shall be holy; for I am holy: neither shall ye defile yourselves with any manner of creeping thing that creepeth upon the earth. For I am the LORD that bringeth you up out of the land of Egypt, to be your God: ye shall therefore be holy, for I am holy."

In context this is a passage that defines clean and unclean animals, so a discussion about holiness might not make immediate sense; as you see though, there is a mark of distinction placed on "creeping things" as being a defiling creature so not suitable for consumption. This is a help to us in defining 'holy' and understanding it beyond just the basic definition. Here it is declared that consuming creeping things defiles you, making you unholy. There is nothing inherent in the creeping thing that makes it defiling to consume – it's a part of the same creation that was declared "very good", after all. It defiles purely for the reason God says it does. His creation, His rules.

The word translated 'holy' in Leviticus and First Peter is defined in Strong's thusly:

H6918 kaw-doshe'; or שׂדֶּשֶׁה qâdôsh; from H6942; sacred (ceremonially or morally); (as noun) God (by eminence), an angel, a saint, a sanctuary:—holy (One), saint

G40 hag'-ee-os; from ἅγιος hágos (an awful thing) (compare G53, H2282); sacred (physically, pure, morally blameless or religious, ceremonially, consecrated):—(most) holy (one, thing), saint

The word designated H6942 that H6918 is derived from is what is translated 'sanctify' in the same verse and it is defined like this:

H6942 kaw-dash'; a primitive root; to be (causatively, make, pronounce or observe as) clean (ceremonially or morally):—appoint, bid, consecrate, dedicate, defile, hallow, (be, keep) holy(-er, place), keep, prepare, proclaim, purify, sanctify(-ied one, self), × wholly

In the creation (as opposed to in God Himself), holiness is a distinguishing between things not based on inherent qualities or characteristics but based on a specific declaration by God Almighty. So at a high level, holiness in the creation is a designation made by God.

Consider this example to drive the point home:

Exo 3:1-5 *“Now Moses kept the flock of Jethro his father in law, the priest of Midian: and he led the flock to the backside of the desert, and came to the mountain of God, even to Horeb. And the angel of the LORD appeared unto him in a flame of fire out of the midst of a bush: and he looked, and, behold, the bush burned with fire, and the bush was not consumed. And Moses said, I will now turn aside, and see this great sight, why the bush is not burnt. And when the LORD saw that he turned aside to see, God called unto him out of the midst of the bush, and said, Moses, Moses. And he said, Here am I. And he said, Draw not nigh hither: put off thy shoes from off thy feet, for the place whereon thou standest is holy ground.”*

Prior to this declaration by God to Moses there was nothing particular or special about this patch of ground. There is no indication that after this experience Moses had with the Lord there was anything remarkable about it in any sort of ongoing way. It was a piece of ground, wherein a bush grew. It was remarkable in that moment because the Lord was Himself physically present in the bush; His inherent and perfect holiness made it a special place.

The holiest of holies, that place beyond the veil in the Tabernacle and Temple were holy by declaration of God because that is where His glory descended to be with His people. The locations where He descended, and the precise location of the ark in the temple are not special coordinates that should be afforded some veneration in this day and age. The place is made important because of God’s presence and His declaration of the holiness of the place, while it serves a purpose for Him, i.e., to deliver a message or denote a separation. You will notice, for instance, that when Christ appears to Abraham on the plains of Mamre, He doesn’t declare where he sat with in the tent to be “holy ground”. He didn’t separate it to Himself in that moment as holy and sequestered for some specific use even though He was still perfect in His holiness while He was there. However, when He comes to Joshua as Captain of the Lord’s host, he does declare it holy:

Jos 5:15 *“And the captain of the LORD’S host said unto Joshua, Loose thy shoe from off thy foot; for the place whereon thou standest is holy. And Joshua did so.”*

He was there in Joshua’s presence to mark a separation and while he had told Joshua previously that “as I was with Moses, so I will be with thee” (Jos 1:5), in this moment He is physically present to call Joshua to a role that Moses was not – conquering Canaan. There is an infusion of courage and purpose in play here that required God’s physical presence, which makes the ground holy during the time He stands upon it. Joshua appropriately shows reverence for that holiness being physically there in his presence.

This declaration of holy ground comes from God separating it to a purpose. In the case of the burning bush and the holy ground around it, He is calling Moses to service and

used that unique sight to draw Moses into a state of mind where he could properly consider the message; He drives home the importance of His being in the presence of God by declaring the ground holy. It forced Moses into a frame of mind. Similarly, the holy and the holiest places, by their separation, force not only a physical but a mental and spiritual separation – it makes them not common – by creating a very real multi-layered separation and being kept pure, or holy by that separation.

Holiness at its core is a manifestation, an obvious display of purity. Moses and Joshua were commanded to remove the shoes from off their feet because God's presence there demanded purity, and He therefore declared the ground as holy. Moses' shoes, for example, were by their very nature covered in the dirt of the road, the filth of animal husbandry, they were naturally tainted being made by men and were as far from pure as can be – and God will have nothing impure in His presence:

Rev 21:27 “And there shall in no wise enter into it any thing that defileth, neither whatsoever worketh abomination, or maketh a lie: but they which are written in the Lamb's book of life.”

Interestingly, holy is one of the most commonly used appellations toward God in Scripture, maybe the most important. After all, it is not “righteous” or “just” that the four beasts declare Him to be with repetition and without rest:

Rev 4:8 “And the four beasts had each of them six wings about him; and they were full of eyes within: and they rest not day and night, saying, Holy, holy, holy, Lord God Almighty, which was, and is, and is to come.”

Consider that for a moment. Of all the attributes of God, this is the one that these magnificent creatures use to demonstrate their reverence and glorify Him, repeatedly calling out this purity, the absolute lack of fault or sin. Not His power, His wisdom, His mercy, His love, His immutability. Why? Because His holiness is the attribute that permeates every other one.

While it is absolutely true that His quintessential attribute is love, it is His holiness that empowers, if you will, all His other attributes. His holiness is His moral character, which shapes His righteousness, mercy, grace, omnipotence, wrath, love, omniscience, justice, sovereignty, etc. It runs through all that He is because it is holiness which makes Him all of these other things.

Consider this as a way to understand the importance of His holiness. He is so holy and pure, sin is such an affront to His purity, such a stench in His nostrils that He was willing to send His only begotten son to wash away that stink from His chosen so that they might stand in His presence. He had to accomplish it in such a (seemingly) hard way because He is entirely holy, which demands that no imperfection associated with any **other** method be allowed to seep into the process. Anything which might have had the slightest possibility of not being holy was unthinkable and could not have been

than saying “be holy, for I am holy”. The distinction might be subtle to many people, but it’s important, because if you try to be holy as God is holy, you fail. No question. Absolute and utter failure, total rejection.

If you seek to be holy **because** God is holy and you glorify Him by emulating that holiness, that is different. Like many things – faithfulness, righteousness, etc. -- you don’t achieve it by your own hand, your own power; not by any innate ability, thinking or anything else native to your being as a creature, but rather by His attribution of holiness to you.

And there’s the rub. God isn’t setting people up to fail here. He’s not setting some standard that can’t be met or perhaps most importantly establishing some sort of works righteousness. Consider this passage:

Lev 20:25-26 “Ye shall therefore put difference between clean beasts and unclean, and between unclean fowls and clean: and ye shall not make your souls abominable by beast, or by fowl, or by any manner of living thing that creepeth on the ground, which I have separated from you as unclean. And ye shall be holy unto me: for I the LORD am holy, and have severed you from other people, that ye should be mine.”

This phrase “ye shall be holy unto me” should help frame this properly. He establishes these rules and courses of conduct so that by following them we will be separate, demonstrably severed from other people. These behaviors aren’t obnoxious nor should they be offensive to anyone on their face. Our separation isn’t manifested by violence or repulsive acts, our separation is from the worship and appeasement of the flesh! It is a clear refusal to run to the excess of riot and working of iniquity mankind embraces.

God calls His people, endows them with faith, provides them understanding of His ways (which otherwise are completely past finding out) and separates them to be a holy people unto Him – not holy to the world, not holy to themselves or each other, but holy unto Him.

When Peter tells us to be holy in our conversation, he isn’t laying some impossible burden on us, he’s describing the outcome of our being called. Holiness, while a duty called to, is the description of what it means to be a peculiar people. As Paul told Timothy we are brought to this holiness through our calling:

2Ti 1:9 “Who hath saved us, and called us with an holy calling, not according to our works, but according to his own purpose and grace, which was given us in Christ Jesus before the world began”

God separates His people to His purposes. He creates in them a sense of duty and servitude that drives a specific set of behaviors that He deems and chooses to call

holy. He imputes holiness upon them by means of their being a separate, a severed people, called out and made separate from the world.

Consider also this element. We talk regularly about not being conformed to the world (Rom 12:2), and rightly so. But not being conformed to the world isn't enough. There is no room for neutrality in this. Separating from the world and trying to live some self-defined moral life is not holiness. You can separate yourself from the world and still not be conformed to God, which is the actual target.

Being holy is working to be in conformity to God. Though it is not possible that man could achieve the holiness of God, given all the things we've already discussed about God's holiness being innate to His being and we are fallen creatures, a lifelong pursuit of holiness as God has defined it is perhaps the highest duty of mankind:

Heb 12:14 *“Follow peace with all men, and holiness, without which no man shall see the Lord:”*

Seeking holiness has two immediate and tangible benefits besides the long term requirement of it if you seek the presence of God for eternity.

First, it leads to happiness that cannot be achieved any other way in this life. Living in holiness for God is part of our service to our Master and King, and Christ plainly told us:

Joh 13:17 *“If ye know these things, happy are ye if ye do them.”*

This isn't just about feeling good because you see yourself as a moral person, letting what you believe to be your good works overcome the guilt you feel at your sins. Jesus isn't talking about some fleeting happiness you feel when you do something nice for someone. He's talking about the truest happiness you can achieve in this life. Happiness in the spirit that comes from holiness.

In context, this is delivered after Jesus washed the Apostles' feet. He used that example to teach them the broader lesson of service to God and one another, specifically that how they live their lives matters; it isn't enough to know what God has said, you must live how God has said to live. It must be in every part of your life. And it generates results.

Remembering that being holy means being separated, sanctified to a purpose set by God, consider this passage:

2Co 6:14-18 *“Be ye not unequally yoked together with unbelievers: for what fellowship hath righteousness with unrighteousness? and what communion hath light with darkness? And what concord hath Christ with Belial? or what part hath he that believeth with an infidel? And what agreement hath the temple of God with idols? for ye are the temple of the living God; as God hath said, I will dwell in*

them, and walk in them; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. Wherefore come out from among them, and be ye separate, saith the Lord, and touch not the unclean thing; and I will receive you, And will be a Father unto you, and ye shall be my sons and daughters, saith the Lord Almighty.”

Being separate is this holiness, because you are refusing to touch the unclean thing. Peter tells us to be “holy in all manner of conversation”. This passage gives you some inclination as to why. Light and darkness cannot have communion. If we are to be children of light we must walk in the day and not have communion with the darkness. This holiness must encompass every part of our lives – work, school, worship, home, everything we think and everything we do should be driven by a desire for and an eye toward holiness. We must ask ourselves daily if we are separating ourselves to God. Especially as these days grow darker and more filled with violence and the depravity of the sodomite. Don’t be fooled here, my friends, a few people peacocking about the great wins over boys in girls sports doesn’t mean the tide has turned. Nothing has truly changed here. You know things are still getting worse when you have dozens of powerful people clearly engaged in pedophilia and trafficking young children and no one is in jail for it. The cup of this generation’s iniquity is still filling.

For us there is constant room for improvement, because we seek to emulate the perfection of the Holy One. We seek His ways, which are all holy, all the time, with no deviation or fault in them of any sort, no wavering or failure. While we know we cannot achieve that, we must strive to get as close to it as we can. We are filthy, fallen creatures, but His calling us to holiness allows for cleansing:

2Co 7:1 “Having therefore these promises, dearly beloved, let us cleanse ourselves from all filthiness of the flesh and spirit, perfecting holiness in the fear of God.”

This being severed from the world, cleansing ourselves from filthiness is what makes us a peculiar people:

1Pe 2:9-10 “But ye are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, an holy nation, a peculiar people; that ye should shew forth the praises of him who hath called you out of darkness into his marvellous light: Which in time past were not a people, but are now the people of God: which had not obtained mercy, but now have obtained mercy.”

Holiness might seem a bit abstract or obtuse because it is obviously a thing that God simply *is* and we cannot be what He is. I think if we set aside all the noise in the world that Satan has interjected through false Christianity and just focus on what the Word tells us about it, it becomes an amazing and comforting element of our submission to God that can bring great peace. I hope this has been helpful and brings you something to meditate on.