

YAMs

Summer Midweek 2009



Week Five:

What does it mean to live a holy life?



covenant chapel

Question: What does it mean to live a holy life?

Short Answer:

To live a holy life first and foremost means that we recognize God as the only one who is truly holy. God is completely set apart from his creation and completely perfect and pure. When we encounter the holiness of God, our sin is exposed and we are filled with a fear, reverence and awe of God as we recognize his holiness for what it is. Consequently we realize we must depend on him to make us holy.

Only out of this proper recognition of God's holiness, we then work ceaselessly by the power of the Holy Spirit to become holy as God is holy. This includes radical obedience to Jesus in the Great Commandment and Great Commission, and waging war against sin in our lives.

Long Answer:

Before we seek to discover what it means to live a holy life, let's first take a second to be reminded that we are called to do just that:

Leviticus 11:44 – For I am the LORD your God. Consecrate yourselves therefore, and be holy, for I am holy.

1 Peter 1:15-16 – but as he who called you is holy, you also be holy in all your conduct, since it is written, "You shall be holy, for I am holy."

So clearly, we are called to be holy. And in order to pursue that calling, we need to grasp the meaning of the word "holy."

The Two meanings of "Holy"

In order to discover what it means to live a holy life, we must first understand what the word "holy" means. And the only logical place to define "holy" is to look at the character of God, because the Bible tells us that he alone is holy:

1 Samuel 2:2 – There is none holy like the Lord; there is none besides you; there is no rock like our God.

As we study the character of God, we will come to see that the word "holy" really conveys two ideas. The first is that of separation, uniqueness, or otherness. The other is absolute perfection and purity.

First, "holy" means separate. Darrel Johnson puts it this way:

The root of the word *holy* is related to a word that means "divide." *Holy* therefore comes to mean something totally unique, separated from the

normal. When God reveals himself as holy, he is saying that he is the Wholly Other. He is totally and wholly other than anything else.¹

God is “holy” because, as creator of all things, he is completely separate from all his creation. He alone is high and exalted (Isaiah 6:1), his ways are higher than our ways and his thoughts are higher than our thoughts (Isaiah 55:9).

Second, “holy” means perfect and completely pure. This definition of “holy” flows from the first one. Part of God’s separate otherness is his absolute perfection, which distinguishes him from all of his creation.

We can see this definition in action by the Isaiah’s response to God’s holiness:

Isaiah 6:1-5 - In the year that King Uzziah died I saw the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up; and the train of his robe filled the temple. Above him stood the seraphim. Each had six wings: with two he covered his face, and with two he covered his feet, and with two he flew. And one called to another and said: "Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory!" And the foundations of the thresholds shook at the voice of him who called, and the house was filled with smoke. And I said: "Woe is me! For I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts!

Isaiah expresses fear in the face of God’s holiness because God’s holiness, by its nature, reveals Isaiah’s sin.

Isaiah’s response leads us to our first answer to this week’s question. To live a holy life means we recognize the holiness of God.

It Means We Recognize the Holiness of God:

To live a holy life first and foremost means that we recognize the holiness of God. This is the foundation for living a holy life, because apart from this recognition we will pursue holiness from an incorrect motivation and a wrong source.

When people truly recognize and encounter the holiness of God, the only response is awe, reverence and fear. God’s holiness reveals our sin and separation from God. It happened with Isaiah, and it happened with Peter when he recognized Jesus for who he was:

Luke 5:7-8 - They signaled to their partners in the other boat to come and help them. And they came and filled both the boats, so that they began to sink. But

¹ Johnson, Darrel. *The Key to Authentic Worship of the Living God*.

when Simon Peter saw it, he fell down at Jesus' knees, saying, "Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord."

The gap between perfection and imperfection is infinite. The holiness of God puts us in our place. It creates humility by reminding us that God alone is holy and perfect.

As we pursue a holy life, it is so important to be reminded of the holiness of God or we will become self-righteous and legalistic. This was the error of the Pharisees. God alone is truly holy.

Therefore, when we recognize the holiness of God, we will abandon efforts to pursue "holiness" on our own. Instead, we will be dependent upon God to work in us to make us holy.

It Means We Depend on God to Make Us Holy:

To live a holy life, we must be dependent on God. As we talked about in week two, God ultimately sets the standard of holy perfection so we will recognize our inability to reach it on our own and turn to him instead.

God's first step in making us holy is sending Jesus to pay the penalty for our sin and to rise from the dead to give us new life. Recall that it is God who does the work, and it is God's intention to save us so that we can be holy:

Colossians 1:21-22 - And you, who once were alienated and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds, he has now reconciled in his body of flesh by his death, in order to present you holy and blameless and above reproach before him

God saves us from sin in order to make us holy. In other words, God saves us to make us pure, separate from the world and ultimately perfect. Our salvation comes from God's grace through faith in Jesus' death and resurrection, but it doesn't end there. God continues to work in our lives to make us holy. This process is known as sanctification.

And make no mistake: it is a process. Throughout our lives God will continue to reveal to us what it means to live a holy life. He will continue to reveal sin in our lives that must be addressed. But we can be confident that he will indeed make us holy.

Philippians 1:6 - And I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ.

1 Thessalonians 5:23-24 - Now may the God of peace himself sanctify you completely, and may your whole spirit and soul and body be kept blameless at

the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. He who calls you is faithful; he will surely do it

Notice from these verses that it is God's activity that ultimately sanctifies us, or makes us holy. Therefore, to live a holy life means we depend completely on God to make us holy. But as God works in and through us, we must take a very active role to pursue holiness.

We will look at two of the ways we actively seek to live a holy life: radical obedience to Jesus and warring against sin.

It Means We Radically Obey Jesus

To live a holy life means that we radically obey Jesus. Jesus was the only human to live a truly holy life, and his words and his actions set the example we are to follow as we seek to live a holy life.

There are so many commands in the Bible, it would take years to look at each individually and consider what it means to obey them (see the Learn More section at the end for a book by John Piper that looks at 50 of Jesus' commands). But the point here is not that we make a checklist of commands and obey them. The point is that our hearts are transformed to love Jesus. And our obedience is the way we demonstrate that love.

John 14:15 - If you love me, you will keep my commandments. And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Helper, to be with you forever

In other words, obedience begins with love for Jesus. And with that initial love and obedience, God sends his Holy Spirit (the Helper) who continually teaches us what obedience to Jesus is, and convicts us of the sin that remains in our lives.

But so that we make this practical, let's look at the most important teachings we need to be radically obedient to: the Great Commandment and the Great Commission.

The Great Commandment:

Matthew 22:36-39 - Teacher, which is the great commandment in the Law?" And he said to him, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets

How do we become radically obedient to the Great Commandment? We arrange our lives in a way where God is unmistakably our highest priority and where we genuinely love others.

This will include the way we spend our time, the way we spend our money, the conversations we have, the movies we watch, the way we work, the vacations we take, the house we live in (or hope to live in), and the things we think about.

If we are radically obedient to the Great Commandment, our lives will look different. They will look weird according to the standards of the world. But that is the way it's supposed to be. If one of the two meanings of the word "holy" is separated, then living a holy life must include our living as separated from the way the world lives. We are to be "set apart" like Paul (Romans 1:1).

But "set apart" does not mean we should physically separate ourselves from people in the world. If so, we would fail to be radically obedient to the other essential teaching, the Great Commission.

The Great Commission:

Matthew 28:18-20 - And Jesus came and said to them, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.

Jesus teaches us that our lives should be used to make disciples. And therefore the call to live a holy life does not mean to hide in a monastery and focus on personal holiness. To do so would be to disobey Jesus, and therefore fail to be holy. Jesus himself specifically asked God not to take his followers out of the world (John 17:15).

As with the Great Commandment, if we are radically obedient to the Great Commission, our lives and priorities will look different. We will share the gospel with others with love and boldness. We will send missionaries, become missionaries ourselves, or both. Our lives will become a testament to the surpassing worth of knowing Jesus (Philippians 3:8).

I emphasize *radical* obedience to remind us that the steps must be drastic. As we seek to obey, we will have to fight against temptations to obey lesser gods. And this leads us to our last point.

It Means We Wage War Against Sin

Since sanctification – the *process* of becoming holy – is indeed a process, we will encounter sin in our lives even after we have received salvation. These may be sins of commission – things we do that we should not – or sins of omission – things we should do that we do not. These sins can be in thought, in word, in action, or in motivation, or some combination of all of those.

Because “holy” also means perfect and pure, seeking to live a holy life means we should strive with all our might to avoid sin. The Bible often portrays this struggle with sin as a war, where Satan and our sinful desires wage war against us:

1 Peter 2:11 - Beloved, I urge you as sojourners and exiles to abstain from the passions of the flesh, which wage war against your soul.

And, as Peter mentions, because we are called to be holy and set apart as “sojourners” and “exiles” in the world, we are to abstain from these sins. But make no mistake, abstaining from sin is not a passive task. Jesus teaches us to wage war against sin and to deal violently with sin in our lives:

Matthew 5:29-30 - If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away. For it is better that you lose one of your members than that your whole body be thrown into hell. And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. For it is better that you lose one of your members than that your whole body go into hell

Now to take this passage literally would mean that each one of us would be eyeless and handless. But you get the point – sin is not to be taken lightly, but violently fought against.

Furthermore, we do not just fight reactively to sin, but proactively. In other words, we don’t just wait for the Holy Spirit to reveal sin and then fight it, but we prepare for the battle ahead of time. This is at the heart of the armor of God metaphor in Ephesians 6:

Ephesians 6:13 – Therefore take up the whole armor of God, that you may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand firm.

The words “may be able to...” point toward the future. We prepare now so that we will withstand in the future. This preparation (along with our radical obedience to Jesus) will keep us from becoming complacent and susceptible to the schemes of Satan. And one of his biggest schemes is deception; and specifically, trying to make us think that the sin in our lives is not a big deal.

Against, this scheme stand Paul’s emphatic words from Galatians:

Galatians 6:8-9 - Do not be deceived: God is not mocked, for whatever one sows, that will he also reap. For the one who sows to his own flesh will from the flesh reap corruption, but the one who sows to the Spirit will from the Spirit reap eternal life

To think that we can simultaneously sin and seek to please God is a huge deception. Sin and the Holy Spirit – our means of becoming holy – are always in

conflict (Galatians 5:17). And the holy God will not be mocked by those who claim to pursue holiness yet still pursue sin.

Therefore, as we seek to live a holy life, there are no neutral actions. Each and every thing we do is either sowing to our flesh (sin) or to the Spirit. And we will reap what we sow. Therefore we must wage war against sin so that we will seek holiness in our lives and reap eternal life.

Summary:

To conclude, we must work actively and ceaselessly to radically obey Jesus and wage war against sin. But our hope is always to be in the grace of God by faith in the death and resurrection of Jesus. Grace, not our holiness, is the foundation of our hope. And grace is the motivation for pursuing holiness:

1 Peter 1:13-16 – Therefore, preparing your minds for action, and being sober-minded, set your hope fully on the grace that will be brought to you at the revelation of Jesus Christ. As obedient children, do not be conformed to the passions of your former ignorance, but as he who called you is holy, you also be holy in all your conduct, since it is written, “You shall be holy, for I am holy.”

To live a holy life is to recognize the holiness of God and our inability to live up to it. Only then, as we depend on God to make us holy, are we moved to radically obey Jesus and wage war against sin in our lives. And we rest confidently but not complacently on the truth that God will complete the good work he has begun in us.

Learn More

From the Bible:

On the Holiness of God:

- Isaiah 6:1-5
- Revelation 4:8
- Revelation 15:4

On Obedience and Fighting Sin

- Matthew 5-7 (Sermon on the Mount)
- 1 John

From Books:

Knowledge of the Holy – A.W. Tozer

(specifically chapter 21 on the Holiness of God)

What Jesus Demands from the World – John Piper

(50 commands of Jesus we must obey as we seek to live a holy life)