

"Be Holy"
Leviticus 19:1-2

February 19, 2017

7th Sunday After the Epiphany

There are many passages in the Bible which we very much enjoy because they comfort us, encourage us, and make us feel good. "God is love." (1 John 4:8,16) is one. "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life," (John 3:16) is another. We readily accept and believe these verses. We live our lives in accordance with these verses.

And then we have verses like our text from the Old Testament lesson for today from Leviticus in which it says, "And the LORD spoke to Moses, saying, "Speak to all the congregation of the people of Israel and say to them, You shall be holy, for I the LORD your God am holy." (Leviticus 19:1-2) What are we to do with this passage? Not even the most pious person or biggest hypocrite would ever claim to be holy. Therefore, such a passage doesn't comfort us or make us feel very good at all.

So what are we to do with this passage? Shall we simply reject the passage as being wrong? While liberal Bible interpreters and many Christians might do such a thing, we, as Bible-based and Bible-believing Christians simply cannot do this.

Shall we ignore the passage and hope it goes away? In our minds, we may be able to ignore it, but I can assure you that it is not going to go away. God's words about our holiness are true and binding whether we consciously think of them or not.

Shall we reinterpret this passage so that it doesn't bother us any more? That's a strategy taken, not only by theologians, seminary professors, and professional Biblical interpreters, but by many every day Christians. When we see something in the Word of God which we don't like, we simply reinterpret it so that it says something we do like. In this case, we may say that, in the Old Testament, God was all about laws and holiness, but, in the New Testament, Jesus came to speak about love and freedom in the Gospel to do what we want. However, we read in our Gospel lesson today that God has not changed His views from the Old Testament. Jesus is not only about love and freedom, but about perfection as well. He says basically the same thing that He said in Leviticus. At the end of His rather stern Sermon on the Mount, He says, "You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect." (Matthew 5:48)

So, how are we to understand and apply this passage? "You shall be *holy*." Nothing could be clearer. God expects – requires - you to be holy, that is, without any sin of any kind ever. Perfect obedience to the unchanging Law of God is meant here and not obedience to ever changing cultural standards and norms. This not only means to never do any evil in thoughts and words (as Jesus taught in the Sermon on the Mount), as well as deeds, but also always to think good, speak good, and do good. I think we sometimes believe that God requires us to never do bad and then try to do as much good as possible. That's a misunderstanding of holiness. Holiness requires us to never do evil and to always do good.

Why does God have such a stringent standard? He requires us to be holy because He is holy. In other words, He requires us to be as He is. This is not a personal preference of God but an unchangeable reality. Sin can no more be in the presence of a holy God than darkness can be in the presence of light. If you are not holy, you will not survive in the presence of a holy God, no matter nice and respectable you are or how hard you've tried to be good. The Word of God is clear about this: "For the wages of sin is death." (Romans 6:23) This is death of your body on earth and death of your soul in hell.

But there is more in this passage than just the command of being "holy". There is also the promise of "you shall be". Despite our best efforts to control our behavior, our tongue, and our mind, we fail miserably at becoming holy. If you are honest with yourself, you know that you are not even close to being holy. I know that I'm not. We are enslaved by sin. We are unable to stop doing the evil God forbids. We are unable to do all the good God commands all the time.

Yet the Lord says that "you shall be holy." How is that possible? For us, it is impossible to accomplish. But all things are possible for God. He has sent His only Son, Jesus Christ, to take our sins upon Himself and to the cross. There, on the cross, a perfect and complete sacrifice for and payment of all our sins – sins of doing evil, sins of failing to do good, sins of thought, sins of word, sins of deed – were made. Jesus bore our sins so that we no longer had to bear them. That which blocked and prevented us from being holy was removed.

But that's not all. Imagine a car covered in mud which is washed only to reveal a ruined paint job. Simply washing the car does not restore a beautiful appearance. It has to be given a fresh coat of paint, too. The negative aspect of dirt and grime have to be removed. The positive aspect of paint and wax have to be added.

In the same way, we are covered in sin. To just take away our sin is only part of what we need. In addition to the forgiveness of our sin which is the removal of the negative, we need holiness – the perfect obedience in thought, word, and deed of God's Law which is the addition of the positive. Jesus did more than just remove the stain of our sin by His death on the cross. He has also given us the brightness of His holiness through His perfect obedience in thought, word, and deed, to the Law of God in His life on earth. Jesus did all of the good things we should have done, but didn't. Jesus did not do any of the evil things we shouldn't have done, but did. As His death gives us His forgiveness for our sin, so His life gives us His holiness for our life before God.

That is the precious gift we receive in baptism: Christ's own holiness. The Word of God says, "For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ." (Galatians 3:27) Other translations say that you have clothed yourself in Christ. The point is this: your sin has been removed and you have put on Christ's holiness. You are dressed in the white robe of His righteousness. Now, when God the Father looks at you, He does not see your sin and all of its filth. Nor does He see some sort of benign neutrality. Rather, He sees Christ and all of His holiness. And, because of Christ and His holiness, God declares you to be holy in His sight. You are holy for the Lord your God is holy and chooses to give His holiness to you.

What then? Does having our sin removed and being clothed in Christ's holiness mean we no longer have to be concerned about living holy lives? Some would think that it doesn't matter how we live now since we have been forgiven and declared holy by grace alone for Christ's sake. In fact, just the opposite is true. Precisely because we have been forgiven all our sins and declared to be holy do we want to live holy lives more and more.

Remember how it is when you have old casual clothes on. You don't care very much if you get them dirty or spill spaghetti sauce on them. After all, they are just old clothes and how you treat them doesn't really matter. However, when you are given nice new clothes – a lovely colorful dress or a sharp suit with a freshly starched white shirt and colorful tie – you act much differently. You don't run through a mud puddle. You use a napkin and lean over the table when you eat. You want to do everything you can to keep and maintain the cleanliness and newness of these special clothes.

It is the same way with our lives in Christ. We have been forgiven our sin and declared holy in the sight of God. We have been given a new and clean life. We want to do all that we can to show in our lives what God has declared to be true about us in our souls. We have been declared holy so we want to keep and maintain that holiness by how we live. Paul sums it up in his letter to the Ephesians, "Put off your old self, which belongs to your former manner of life and is corrupt through deceitful desires, and...put on the new self, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness." (Ephesians 4:22-24) Live holy lives which do not do the evil God forbids or even thinks or speaks that evil. Live holy lives which do the good which God commands as well as speak and think that good as well.

This will not be easy. In addition to fighting against your own sinful nature, you will be opposed by a society which is thoroughly anti-Christian; by friends who chide you for taking your religion too seriously; and even by members of your own family who do not share your faith. Do not be discouraged and do not give up. But remember this: keeping and maintaining holiness is no easier than becoming holy in the first place. You are holy in God's sight because of His grace and power. You can keep and maintain that holiness only through God's grace and by His power.

You receive the grace to be called holy by God and the power to live holy lives only by remaining united to Christ, the source of your holiness. He gives you the means by which you can do that. When plagued by sin and guilt and doubting your holy standing before God, remember your baptism by which you were cleansed of your sin and clothed in the holiness of Christ and you will be reassured. When unsure of how to live out your holiness in your life, hear, read, and study the Word of God in Divine Service, in Bible Class, and at home and you will be shown the way. When you need to be united to Christ in a close and personal way for the assurance and comfort to live holy lives, there is no closer and more personal way to do this than to receive His body and blood with bread and wine in Holy Communion.

"You shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy." This is a command by the Lord to be and live a certain way. Since we have failed to do that, this becomes a promise of the Lord that He will correct this situation so that we are holy. Since Christ came into this world to live a life of holiness in obedience to the Law of God and to die for the sin of the world, this becomes a statement of fact regarding who we are. Since we are God's holy children through faith in Jesus' life, death, and resurrection, this becomes a direction of how we are to live. "You shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy." Amen