

"Be Holy"

Leviticus 19:1-2, 15-18

October 23, 2011

19th Sunday After Pentecost

It was Mark Twain, well-known American author, humorist, and religious skeptic, who once quipped, "It ain't those parts of the Bible that I can't understand that bother me, it is the parts that I do understand." His words demonstrate a truth which may bother you as well. It is easy for us to ignore or dismiss unclear or difficult Biblical teachings simply because we find them to be difficult or unclear. They don't bother us. What troubles us are those teachings which use simple words and are quite clear. When they hit home with us, we don't quite know what to do with them.

We are presented with such a clear and easy to understand statement in our Old Testament lesson. The Lord tells Moses to speak to the entire congregation of Israel and say, "You shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy." Nothing difficult to understand here: God's people are to be holy. "Holy" means to be completely pure and without sin all the time.

This is troubling. Do any of you actually think that you are what God clearly says you must be? Do you even obey the two chief commandments which Jesus presents in the Gospel lesson today? Do you love the Lord your God with *all* your heart and with *all* your soul and with *all* your mind? If you claim that you do, then your attitude toward the Word of God and worship, your obedience to the 10 Commandments, and the priorities in how you choose to use your time and possessions will reflect that all the time. Do you do that perfectly and all the time or are there times when your behavior does not reflect a pure and total love for God?

Do you love your neighbor as yourself? If you do, then your life will be centered around serving your neighbor according to the 10 Commandments, beginning with your family, your church family, and the neighbor you run into on the street. Do you do that perfectly and all the time or are you selfish and self-centered at times?

If we are honest, we will admit that we sin against God and sin against our neighbor. We do that by doing that which the Word of God forbids. We also do that by failing to do all which the Word of God commands. We sin in our actions. We sin in our words. We sin even in our thoughts and attitudes. None of us is even close to being holy. The problem with holiness is that, once you've lost it, you cannot get it back. If your teacher at school said that perfection on the final exam was required to pass the class and you got the first question wrong, you could answer the next 100 questions correctly or the next 1,000 questions correctly, and you will never achieve perfection.

“You shall be holy.” Maybe we misunderstood what the Lord was saying through Moses. Maybe the Lord meant, “You shall try your best and I will accept you just the way you are.” That’s what many today claim God wants, even people within the Church. We would like it to be that since that’s the philosophy we hear at school, on our athletic teams, and, sometimes, in our jobs: try your best and it will be all right. We can easily achieve that. The only trouble with this explanation is that the Lord uses the word “holy” – which means perfect and pure – not “best”. He requires a holiness of us which is the same as His. Well, maybe the Lord meant that this standard is for pastors and super Christians and not for the average layman in the pew. This is another popular explanation which might get you off the hook. Many times I’ve had people imply or even state outright that my behavior (and sometimes the behavior of my family) should be held to a higher standard because I’m a pastor. Perhaps some of the leaders in this congregation have experienced the same thing simply because you are faithful Christians. By doing this, people may feel that the Lord has a lesser standard for laymen which they then might be able to achieve. The only trouble with this explanation is that the Lord commands Moses to speak these words “to all the congregation of the people of Israel.” There are no exceptions to the standard of holiness. It is required for all who are God’s people.

Maybe our last chance to get out of this is to claim that this is a command only for God’s Old Testament people. There are those who think that, in the Old Testament, people became right with

God by obeying the Law, but that, in the New Testament, people become right with God by grace. Since we are New Testament people, we are off the hook. Not so fast! This commandment of God to be holy is repeated by God, almost verbatim, through His Son, Jesus Christ, in the Sermon on the Mount in the New Testament. Jesus said, "Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect." (Matthew 5:48). Holiness is the requirement for all of God's people for all times: Old Testament and New Testament.

Well, then you and I are sunk. It should be clear by now that we have not misunderstood the words of the Lord through Moses. He requires us to be holy. We cannot explain this in any other way. We are not holy in and of ourselves. There is no escaping God's punishment for lack of holiness: death and hell. What are we to do?

The only way we can be holy is not to look to ourselves, to our hearts, and to our behavior. Those are all utterly sinful. While we are not intrinsically holy in ourselves, there is a holiness which exists outside of ourselves: God's own holiness. The only way God's requirement can be fulfilled is not by becoming holy through our own action but by receiving holiness from Him through His action.

Jesus Christ came into this world to be holy as His Father is. He did this, not to show off or prove a theological point. He did it for you and He did it for me that we might be holy as the Lord our God is holy.

The Law of God requires many things. We see some of those behaviors which the Lord requires in the rest of our Old Testament lesson. Jesus came and lived the perfect life while He was here on earth. He was holy in thought, holy in word, and holy in deed. The Scriptures explain why He did this. In Romans, Paul writes, "Consequently, just as one trespass resulted in condemnation for all people, so also one righteous act resulted in justification and life for all people. For just as through the disobedience of the one man the many were made sinners, so also through the obedience of the one man the many will be made righteous." (Rom. 5:18-19) As we have inherited sin from Adam by his disobedience which makes us sinners, so we have inherited holiness from Christ by His obedience

which makes us holy. Holiness is something is given, not something not earned. You and I have been declared to be holy for Christ's sake, even though we haven't lived holy lives.

So, what about all the sin that stains our lives? Jesus took care of that, as well. He allowed Himself to be bound, tortured, and crucified as the sacrifice for all sin of all time. He chose to lay down His life that He might redeem our lives. He rose from the grave to a new and perfect life so that we could rise from our graves to new and perfect lives. The Scriptures say, "the blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from all sin. If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness. (1 John 1:7-9) In God's eyes, we are pure and holy for Christ's sake because we have been purified by the blood of Jesus shed on the cross.

Holiness is all a gift of God, rather than an achievement of man. It is received by faith, not earned by obedience. St. Paul sums it up all very well in the 3rd chapter of Romans where he writes, "Therefore no one will be declared righteous in God's sight by the works of the law; rather, through the law we become conscious of our sin. But now apart from the law the righteousness of God has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify. This righteousness is given through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe."

God distributes that holiness to you in your baptism where your sins were washed away and your were given faith to receive the gift of holiness. God speaks that holiness to you in His Word of Absolution and Preaching. God feeds that holiness to you in the body and blood of His Son, Jesus Christ, in Holy Communion.

We gather here, not to justify our behavior for the last week or to show God how holy we have tried to be. Rather, we come here to have Him justify us and give us His holiness. The Scripture says, "It is because of [God] that you are in Christ Jesus, who has become for us wisdom from God—that is, our righteousness, holiness and redemption." (1 Cor. 1:30) When you are "in Christ" , you have His righteousness, His holiness and His redemption.

Therefore, if you want to “be holy” as God requires, then be where Christ has promised to be that you might be covered by His holiness. Be in your baptism every day where you were united to the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit and declared to be His holy child. Be in the Word of God every day where you are declared to be forgiven and holy in the name and for the sake of Jesus Christ. Be regularly at the altar of our Lord to receive His body and blood for the forgiveness of sin and to strengthen your bond with Christ and with fellow believers. Having been declared holy in God’s sight through the forgiveness of sins and the reception of Christ’s own righteousness, you are free to live holy lives through your union with Christ. You are free to love the Lord, your God and to love your neighbor as yourself, not in order to become holy by those works, but because you are already holy by the works of Christ. There is no pressure from the condemnation of the Law, only the freedom in the declaration of righteousness of the Gospel.

A retired pastor I once knew who was formerly a vice-president of the Synod told me about being at the bedside of his dying father who was also a pastor. The father was despairing over how he failed to do this or that task while in the ministry. The retired pastor said that, at first, he tried to reassure his father that he had been a good pastor and had done many good things. Then, it struck him that he was looking at the wrong thing and encouraging his father to look at the wrong thing: his own righteousness. He then began to assure him of Christ’s righteousness – His holiness – which was His by grace through faith.

Whenever you might despair over your lack of holiness – whether it be on your death bed or in day to day life – make sure you are looking at the right place – not yourself and your righteousness but to Christ and His righteousness. As Paul said in Philippians, “What is more, I consider everything a loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them garbage, that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ—the

righteousness that comes from God on the basis of faith.” (Philippians 3:8-9). His righteousness is our righteousness. We are holy. Amen.