

Christians, are you holy? Would you use that word to describe yourself? I suspect that many would probably say, "No. I'm not all that holy. I know the things that I have done, the evil things that I have thought, and for that reason I don't consider myself to be holy." But this is to misunderstand what the Bible means by holiness. Because Paul says in our reading for today, verse 7: "God has not called us for impurity, but in holiness." To be a Christian means that you are holy, that you are becoming like God. So we need to understand, then, what the Bible actually means when it talks about being holy.

And perhaps the easiest way to figure that out is, first of all, to talk about what it doesn't mean. Because sometimes I think that we think holiness is a feeling, that I am on fire for God, that I am in some emotional state, that I'm worked up, that I'm getting excited. Because sometimes you see people like that, right? They get real excited about God, especially out in public. And we look at them and say, "Well, they must be holy. They are really on fire for God. They must really know what it means to be holy. But me? I don't get that excited. I don't get worked up. I don't even like singing that much. So I don't feel like I'm all that holy." But Christians, this is not what the Bible means by holiness. Feelings can be deceptive. There are some people who will go about from church to church looking for some kind of emotional feeling. They're more interested in how it makes them feel rather than what they're actually teaching. And as long as they can get that, then they will feel like they're on fire for God. But their words and their actions don't match up with each other. They don't live the way that they're supposed to. So holiness is not a feeling. Holiness is something else.

And holiness is not talking in a religious way. Because there is sometimes people who will talk for days about what the Bible says, about what God has to say. And we hear them talking and say, "Well, they must know what they're talking about. They really seem to get it! So they are the holy ones. I, on the other hand, I don't talk about it all that much. I don't know as much about the Bible as I'd like to, so maybe I'm not all that holy." I think this happens especially with pastors, because pastors talk an awful lot about God. And people might come to the conclusion that they're holier as a result of it. But this is not what the Bible means by holiness. Because sometimes somebody who talks a lot about God is really only doing it to impress other people, to show how much they know. Sometimes people will study very hard so that people will notice them. But again, what they studied and the way that they live are two different things. They are not living holy lives. So no, being holy is not about talking in a religious way. Holiness is something else.

Holiness is also not being outwardly religious. Just so you understand what I mean, the kind of people who seem to be very devout, the kind of people who seem to be very religious. They go to church every single week. Their house is decorated with all kinds of crosses. It seems like they really are serious about being Christians. We can look at them too and say, "They must be holy, because they're so serious about it. I mean, just look at their lives! Look at how often they go to church. I, on the other hand, I don't feel the same way, and so I must not be as holy." But Christians, this is not what the Bible means by holiness. These are important things, to be sure. Don't get me wrong. But someone might go to church every single week and yet still be very far from God. Because somebody might be going to church only because they are expected to. They don't want the neighbors to start talking about them. Or because they're doing it purely out of habit rather than a desire to be there. But during the rest of the week, they live like the rest of the

world. You wouldn't be able to tell the difference between them and somebody who never goes to church at all. They are Sunday Christians at best. So no, holiness is not about being outwardly religious. Holiness is something else.

And as one last example, holiness is not about being perfect. I think we get that notion sometimes too. That somebody who is holy is the one who's got it all figured out. They think the right things. They do the right things. They never seem to get anything wrong. They are the holy ones. Holiness means being perfect, being a saint, being an angel. But then I think about the things I've done, the bad things I said or the bad things that I've done, and I know that I'm no saint. And so I say, "I must not be all that holy." But Christians, this is also to misunderstand what the Bible means by holiness. Because holiness is not this impossible standard that God expects us to keep that only a few people do. Holiness is a growing thing, something that increases, something that becomes more and more. It's like a plant which starts out so small, but becomes bigger and bigger. Because holiness is God working in us to make us more like himself.

So that then gives us a better picture of what holiness is according to the Bible. Holiness is a separation, Christians. It is being separate from the world, separated from sin. It is being set apart towards God, set apart to do what is right. We are being taken out of what we once were and being changed into something new. That is what holiness is. And this holiness, this change within us, is a gift that comes from God, a work of the Holy Spirit within you. Because God not only comes to you today, Christians, to forgive you, to take away your sins. God also comes to take away the love of sin. God has come to take you away from the rule of sin. We are no longer bound to it. We have been set free because of Jesus. God is changing your heart to make you more and more like him. And so holiness is thinking like God. Holiness is acting like God. Holiness is being like God and becoming more and more like him. Being changed from what we once were under sin into something new, becoming like Jesus in everything. This is why Paul says to the Thessalonians, "We ask and urge you in the Lord Jesus that as you receive from us how you ought to walk and to please God, just as you are doing, that you do so more and more." We know what God wants us to do. We know his will. And to be holy means to do that more and more.

But that's hard, we say! Being holy is hard work. It always seems like such a struggle. Like we take two steps forward for God, but then suddenly we find ourselves three steps back. Never seems like we make any progress. What are we supposed to do? But Christians, that's nothing new. Because sin is always a danger for us. Sin is still a reality even as Christians. I mean, look at the Thessalonians, for example. They were not living the way that they were supposed to live. This is why Paul tells them and warns them about sexual sins. Paul warns them that they need to be self-controlled. Paul warns them that they need to stop fighting among themselves. The Thessalonians were struggling with these things. These sins were prominent among them. And Paul warns them that if they keep doing this, if they keep living in this unholy way, there would be serious consequences. God would judge them as a result. They needed to take sin seriously.

And Christians, this is also true for us. Sin is still a constant danger. And if we are not fighting back against that sin, there will be serious consequences. We have to fight! To be a Christian means we have to fight. We can't say that we don't want to fight because it's too hard. We can't say that we don't want to fight because we really don't want to give up sin. We have to fight,

because sin will destroy us. We have to fight, because sin will kill us. So yes, holiness is hard. And it is a constant struggle. And sometimes it's going to feel like it isn't there at all, that we are completely unholy before the Lord.

But Christians, Jesus is not trying to crush you. He's not trying to destroy you. Jesus is working to save you. Jesus wants to make you holy. And no matter how hard it may be, no matter what we have to give up for the sake of God, God wants to make you holy for himself. Because through the Holy Spirit, God makes you new. And through the Holy Spirit, God causes you to grow. And even if your holiness seems like it's so small and it's about to go out, God will preserve you, because God will never fail those who trust in him. God made you new, Christians. God forgave you your sins in his Son, Jesus Christ. And he will also nurture you and give you growth in holiness, for all those who trust in him.

So how then do we grow? What does it mean to grow in holiness? We grow through the things that God has given to us. We grow in holiness through the Word. We grow in holiness through prayer. We grow in holiness through church. And we grow in holiness through the sacraments. All of these things that God has given for the strengthening of our faith. Apart from them, there is no growth. We cannot expect to become holier if we stay away from the things that God gives to us. Think of it this way. Most of you have cattle. Would you expect to feed your cattle once and then expect them to survive the whole rest of the winter on that one feeding alone? Why would you not nurture your faith? Faith needs to be fed. Holiness needs something to grow. Or when you go to your field here in a few months to plant in the spring, will you plant it once and then say, "Well, I don't have to pay attention to it at all until the harvest?" That's not how it works. You have to give it care. You have to show it concern. You have to do all of these things so that you are successful. Faith is the same way. We can't stay away from the things that God gives us and expect it to just magically grow. Faith and holiness grow through the gifts of the Lord. And so through these gifts, the Spirit comes to us, and he causes us to become one with God. Through these gifts, the Spirit feeds us and makes us holier in his sight.

So Christians, let us be in these things. Let us be in the Word, in prayer, in church, in the sacraments. These are the gifts God gives to feed us. And let us turn away from our sins. Let us put away those things that keep us from God. Let us turn towards the Lord, because God has made us holy through his Son, Jesus Christ. And God will make us holier still through the work of the Holy Spirit.

Let us pray. Lord God, heavenly Father, you have not called us for impurity but in holiness. Help us always to strive after you, knowing that you will care for us and nurture us, and that you will show us the way we ought to go. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.