

SET APART

The True Meaning of Holiness

By Dr. Galen Peterson

© 2016 American Remnant Mission

According to Jewish tradition, there are two main elements that inaugurate the Sabbath: the lighting of candles and the reciting of a blessing over wine known as *kiddush*, meaning “sanctification.” It is a custom that has developed over time.

Originally, back in biblical times, *Shabbat* was centered around the home. There were no public services on Friday evening. Jews would cease working and then gather as families beginning with a special meal. After the setting of the sun, which signified the onset of Shabbat, the head of the household would recite the blessing known as *kiddush*. Using a cup of wine as a symbol, it was a way of acknowledging God’s blessings and the special nature of the Sabbath which had begun.

But when the Temple in Jerusalem was destroyed in 70 A.D., local synagogues took on a greater focus in Jewish life. So during Talmudic times (2nd-5th centuries A.D.), synagogue services began taking place on *Erev Shabbat*—Friday evenings. And the practice of saying the *kiddush* moved to the synagogue as well. Only it was moved to the end of the service. That is a practice that has carried forward to this day.

It’s interesting to note that according to *Halacha* (Jewish law), some foods have a higher degree of importance than others. In this custom, bread is given a higher precedence over wine. So normally the blessing over bread would come before the blessing over wine. But since *kiddush* had such a prominent historical association with Shabbat, it was determined that the bread would be covered, symbolically “removing” it from the table, thus not calling for a blessing right away. Then, after the blessing over the cup, the bread could be uncovered and thus ready to be blessed.

The way that Shabbat candles are lit is similar. In Jewish custom, a person may not enjoy the benefits of a practice until a suitable blessing is recited. So the normal order is bless first then enjoy second. But once the blessing over the candles is recited, *Shabbat* is considered to have begun, and doing work like kindling fire is not permitted. So the solution was to light the candles first, then to say the blessing with one’s eyes covered. And when you remove your hands from your eyes, you can now enjoy the benefit of the light without doing any work.

That, then, is the *how* of these practices. What about the *why*? Lighting candles and saying the *kiddush* blessing on *Shabbat*, are based on a biblical principle that is essential for godly living. It is the concept of holiness and sanctification.

If you were to ask the average person what the word holiness means, you would probably hear something about God’s majesty and glory. Or they might think of a devout and pious human being like the Pope or the Dali Lama or an esteemed rabbi. But that is not what the word for holiness actually means.

The Hebrew concept of holiness is based on the verb **קָדַשׁ** *kadash*. Usually this word is translated as “sanctify, consecrate or hallow.” But the root of this verb literally means “to separate” or “to set apart.” It is a picture of something or someone being divided with a gap in

between.¹

This concept of holiness as separation is graphically illustrated in the way that God separated Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden after they sinned. He placed a flaming sword at the entrance to the garden that turned in every direction and would quite literally separate their bodies into pieces if they attempted to return there (Gen. 3:24). They had become separated from God's presence and in a short time they would be separated from the living because death is the consequence of sin (Ezek. 18:4).

Another passage that demonstrates the seriousness of separation from sin is found in Leviticus 20 in which God warned the people of Israel against the evil of the Canaanite nations that worshiped the false god Molech:

“Any man from the sons of Israel or from the aliens sojourning in Israel, who gives any of his offspring to Molech, shall surely be put to death” (Lev. 20:2).

Several ancient writers in the Greco-Roman world describe the idol representing Molech (Gr. Moloch) as being a bronze statue with the head of a bull and arms extended, and it had a place at the bottom for building a fire that escaped through openings in the statue. Parents would offer the children as sacrifices in order to appease Molech, and it was common to sacrifice your firstborn child as a way of securing financial prosperity and fertility for subsequent births.

Sholem Asch, the early 20th century Jewish writer, wrote what is considered to be the most dramatic depiction of Molech worship in his historical novel, *The Nazarene*. He tells the story of one such offering to Molech in which priests of the cult led a mother and her child in a procession through a city of the Ammonites. They came to the idol and offered up prayers before lighting the fire in its hollow belly. Asch goes on to say:

Then, when the iron body of the idol had grown red with the heat of the fire, the High Priest approached mother and child; and he lifted the child in his two strong arms and showed him to the people. . . . And the High Priest took the child, and carried it to the blazing idol and placed it upon the fiery arms.

And there was heard a great screaming from the child. . . . and the people were caught up in the rejoicing of the instruments, and the weeping of the child was heard no more. . . . And there was no groan from the mother's lips, nor were there tears in her eyes; but she smiled and laughed as though it were a joy of the spirit to her; all this that the idol might find the sacrifice acceptable, for that it is well in the eyes of their god that the mother shall show no pity on her own flesh and blood.²

God was calling the people of Israel to separate themselves from that degree of manifest evil. He especially declared His opposition to anyone participating in such an evil act and then defiling His sanctuary (Lev 20:3). Whether it would be the Tabernacle or the temple later on, it was abhorrent to Him that anyone could blend together such things. And in the same verse, the reason He opposes this behavior is that it profanes or damages His holy name. And that is never a good thing. So this warning against mixing any kind of false spirituality with true biblical worship should not be taken lightly. God's people are to be set apart from involvement in any form of ungodly worship because it brings a stain upon His name.

Ultimately all forms of sinfulness defile God's purity and perfection, and thus cause

¹ The derivatives of this verb are קִדְּשׁ (*kodesh*) – n. “holiness,” קָדוֹשׁ (*kadosh*) – adj. “holy,” and קִידּוּשׁ (*kiddush*) – n. “sanctification blessing.”

² Sholem Asch, *The Nazarene* (337-338).

separation from Him, unless our sinfulness is cleansed. And that can only be done with the blood of Yeshua that “cleanses us from all sin” (1 Jn 1:7). So the vital promise that we share as believers is that we will be able to remain in God’s presence throughout eternity, never separated from Him, when He completes our spiritual transformation and changes our nature so that we are no longer capable of sinning.

But until that day, we are called to maintain separation in a number of ways that is consistent with humanity’s present separation from God. In Scripture God has decreed four ways that establish separation that is functional in nature:

- **Persons**—The nation of Israel was set apart from other nations, priests were set apart from the general populace, and the High Priest was further set apart from the priests in general.
- **Places**—Certain locations were set apart for divine purposes. When God appeared to Moses in the burning bush, He told Moses: “Do not come near here; remove your sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground” (Ex 3:5). When God gave the Torah to Moses on Mt. Sinai, He declared that the mountain was holy ground and boundaries had to be set around it (Exod. 19:12). Likewise, the Tabernacle and Temple were set apart places where only the priests could function. The Holy of Holies was further set apart for the High Priest alone.
- **Objects**—The Torah was called holy (Rom 7:12). All of the Scriptures are likewise considered to be holy (Rom 1:2; 2 Tim 3:15). The various objects used in Tabernacle and Temple worship were deemed holy, such as the altar (Ex 29:37), the showbread in the Holy place (Lev 24:9), and the garments worn by the High Priest (Ex 28:2-4).
- **Time** — Common everyday time was separated from other specific periods called *moedim* that were dedicated to worship and godly rest. The weekly holy time was the sabbath, and on certain dates on the Hebrew calendar were the feasts (Lev. 23).

All of these ways could only be used for the purposes established by God, not for any common purpose. So in that culture, it was easy to set yourself apart from the rest of the world and testify that you were truly dedicated to Adonai. In that way, it seems wise to ask how well we are set apart from this world today? If someone was to compare our lives to that of those who reject Adonai as being Lord over their lives, could they see a difference?

It is also important to ask what holiness is not. When we consider the various ways of practicing holiness across the ages, we can see that many groups have withdrawn completely from the world. Monks who cloister themselves in monasteries are dedicated to lives of prayer and what they call theosis, or “union with God.” And there are cults in which charismatic leaders require that their followers remove themselves from all other sources of information and listen only to them, sometimes with tragic results.

But when we consider the full measure of God’s Word, we can see that holiness is not isolation. God has called for us to avoid the sinful practices of other people, but not to avoid people altogether. In fact, He sets us apart to be His witnesses to those who have not yet believed in Yeshua. Repeatedly in Scripture we see how persons who become redeemed are then called to go to others with the message of salvation:

“The Holy Spirit said, ‘Set apart for Me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them’ “ (Acts 13:2).

“Paul, a bond-servant of Messiah Yeshua, called as an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God” (Rom 1:1).

In the *Tanakh* (Old Testament), Israel’s calling was to be a kingdom of priests and a light to the nations. The exact same admonition is given to believers in the New Testament. Being holy means we can be both of these things. Like priests, we can minister to the needs of others. And as light to the world, we can reach out to others with the Good News.

In order to do both of those things we cannot live in isolation. We have to become involved in the lives of others, but at the same time being wise about how they can influence us in return. To put it another way—we are called to engage the world as a witness while not acting in a worldly manner. That’s what it means to be set apart for His service. And that is an aspect of true holiness that applies to all of us.

So the question then becomes—what does it look like in a practical sense when we make holiness a high value in our lives? With the Bible as our guide, we are given:

A Messianic profile of holiness

Biblical Principle—God is absolutely holy

- Since He is set apart from all creation as its Creator (Gen 1:1), we reject any belief that says human beings can become one with God or can elevate themselves to divine status like it is taught in Hinduism, Kabbalah and other groups.
- Since “There is no one holy like Adonai” (1 Sam. 2:2), we uphold the belief that He alone is God, and that there is no other deity in the universe. Thus all claims to the contrary are false and cannot be embraced as an expression of cultural tolerance.
- Since the name of God is holy (Isa 57:15; Mat 6:9), it should be treated reverently. So in keeping with the long-standing Jewish custom (going back to biblical times) of not verbalizing YHWH (LORD) when reading God’s personal name, Messianic congregations use Adonai, meaning Lord, whenever possible. We also do not use Jehovah, for it is a faulty transliteration of the original Hebrew by a 13th century Spanish monk named Raymundus Martini. Moreover, the name Allah is not interchangeable with YHWH because God uses names to convey truth, and the meaning behind Allah is very different than YHWH, as well as having divergent attributes as taught in the Quran. Thus accepting these names as being interchangeable confuses God’s identity and is completely inconsistent with the principle of holiness or being set apart.

Biblical Principle—Believers are called to a life of personal holiness

- Since God has declared, “You shall be holy, for I, Adonai, your God am holy” (Lev 19:2; 20:26), the lives of believers should reflect His holiness. That means being set apart in such ways that we do not behave as others do. But how true is that for the believing community today? It has been well-documented that the divorce rate of evangelical Christians is statistically no different than the general population. Do we gossip less than the general population? Do we speak less harshly about other people or directly to their faces? Ephesians 4 is just one of many passages that characterize a set-apart life as speaking truth, not lies,

controlling anger, respecting the property of others, controlling our tongue, avoiding bitterness, and forgiving others just like God forgives us. We would do well to ask ourselves if we are set apart from the values of the world and if we truly are a reflection of the holiness of God.

- Since outward expressions of holiness are insufficient if our inner heart is not right (Mat 15:1-11), we have to guard against self-piety and judging others. You may have a vision of what holiness has to look like, but if someone else does not share that vision, demanding that they adopt it will never be successful, and will, more likely drive them away. It can only come as a desire of the heart.

Biblical Principle—Congregations are called to uphold holiness as a body

- Since God has called us to assemble together (Heb. 10:25), when we gather here we are setting ourselves apart from the rest of the world to worship the Lord, to pray and to study His Word. It becomes a time that is separate from our daily routines. It means emphasizing our responsibilities toward one another, and not fostering independent lone rangers.
- Since the Torah was called holy (Rom 7:12) and all of the Scriptures are likewise considered to be holy (Rom 1:2; 2 Tim 3:15), we need to uphold the Word of God as being set apart from all other books. That means making the public reading of Scripture a central foundation of what we do in our gatherings. And it means being clear about other books, especially those that are rabbinic in nature such as the Talmud, hold no authority over the lives of believers. Any aspect of daily or worship life must be based on the Word of God alone.
- Since “Adonai blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy” (Ex 20:11) and called it a sign between Himself and the descendants of Israel throughout their generations (Ex 31:13), God has established Shabbat as a set apart time for Messianic believers. For that reason, we hold our services on Friday evening, which in the biblical way of reckoning time from sundown to sundown, is the beginning of Shabbat.
- Since God has likewise established the Feasts as set apart days during the year (Lev 23), as a Messianic congregation we observe them in a way that is faithful to their underlying spiritual principles and by showing their fulfillment in Yeshua and God’s redemptive plan for this world.

It is mistaken to assume that the ways of holiness established by God are irrelevant today. At no place in the Word of God has any concept that has been declared holy by God, ever being declared as no longer being holy. This fact is consistent with the entire principle of holiness involving people being based on the holiness of God and “I, the LORD, do not change” (Malachi 3:6). So these are some things that should not be taken lightly.

All that we do individually or as a body needs to reflect faithfully the holiness that God requires from us. Is there something different about you that others will notice? For Yeshua has declared: “Let your light shine before men in such a way that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father who is in heaven” (Mat 5:16).

I was once approached by a ten-year-old boy after I spoke at a church. He told me: “My dad is Jewish but he doesn’t believe in Jesus. I try telling him what the Bible says, but he tells me that he’s not interested in what *that* book has to say. I love him and want him to be with me in

heaven, but I don't know what to do.”

I replied that sometimes people won't listen to our words or read the Bible. So I encouraged him to be a 'living book'—living our lives just as the Bible teaches us to do by being obedient, loving, kind and serving others. I told him: “When we do that, sooner or later they will want to know what makes us different. That's when we can say how believing in Jesus makes us different. So don't forget, your dad is reading your 'living book' everyday. Let's make sure he gets the right message.”

I am persuaded that our attempts to be different or holy are often misguided. It is not just about going to church or a messianic congregation while your neighbors stay at home or go to the movies. It's not just about keeping kosher or the feasts or taking a stand for Israel or the many other aspects that are part of our believing culture, even if they are worthy of our attention. It's about having a holy character that sets you apart from others.

- While other people are being self-centered and indulgent, are you being compassionate and serving?
- When people all around us are being greedy for all they can get, are you giving yourself for the benefit of others?
- When cursing and rudeness abound, are you blessing people with words of kindness?
- When individuals tell gossip and hold grudges, are you in control of your tongue?
- And are you forgiving others, even if they do not deserve it?

These are the characteristics of a life that has been changed by the power of the Holy Spirit and brightly reflects the very nature of God. And that is the kind of holiness that God desires from us.