

"In the same way then, there has also come to be at the present time a remnant according to God's gracious choice" (Romans 11:5)

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SET APART

The True Meaning of Holiness

by Galen Peterson

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. The meal would actually begin in the late afternoon before the Sabbath officially began.

So you can imagine the family reclining together, talking about the size of the olive harvest, telling Samaritan jokes, and about the time when one of the children got lost in the crowd in Jerusalem. But from time to time the head of the household would have his eye on the horizon. Then, with the setting of the sun, which signified the onset of *Shabbat*, he would interrupt the meal and recite the *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 in Talmudic times (2nd-5th centuries A.D.) services in the synagogue were begun on Friday evenings. And the practice of saying the *kiddush* accompanied these gatherings. 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*, the rabbis came up with a solution—the bread would be covered, symbolically "removing"

it from the table, thus not calling for a blessing.

Then, after the blessing over the cup, the bread could be uncovered and thus ready to be blessed. This is a custom that is very similar to way the candles are lit. 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 been ushered in. And at that point, no work can be performed, including lighting candles. So the rabbinical solution was to physically 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*?

In the case of the lighting of candles and the reciting of the *kiddush* blessing on *Shabbat*, there is a common aspect that helps us

to understand a spiritual principle that is essential for godly living. It is the concept of holiness and sanctification.

Now 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 holy actually means.

The Hebrew concept of holiness is based on the verb *kadash*. Sometimes this word is translated as "to be holy" or "to consecrate or sanctify." But the root of this verb literally means "to cut off" or "to separate" or "to set apart." You have this picture of something or someone being divided with a gap in between.

This concept is graphically illustrated in the way that God separated Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden after they sinned. There was a flaming sword that turned in every direction would quite literally cut them if they attempted to return to there (Gen. 3:24). They were now truly 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).

Holiness, then, is not an expression of glory or piety. In its basic meaning, it refers to being separated. It can be separation in several ways:

- **God and humanity**—God, who is perfect in every way is separate from people because of their sinful imperfection.
- **Persons**—as God has decreed, priests are set apart from the general populace, and the High Priest is further set apart from the priests in general.

- **Places**—certain locations were set apart for divine purposes. When God gave the Torah to Moses on Mt. Sinai, He declared that the mountain was holy ground and set boundaries 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.

- **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 certain dates of the Hebrew calendar were feasts (Lev. 23).

Now the question becomes, what are the characteristics of true holiness?

Holiness means being set apart from other gods

When Israel was about to take possession of the land promised to them by God, the Lord warned them to remain completely separate from the Canaanite nations dwelling there. It was a warning in part because of the ungodly practices of these nations, including the hideous practice of sacrificing their own children on altars to their gods. But it was also out of concern that intermingling with them would create the risk of abandoning the true God for false ones. The Lord's wisdom was direct: "For they will turn your sons away from following Me to serve other gods" (Deut. 7:4).

It's human nature to get distracted or to change loyalty. We follow after things that allure and tempt us. We grow bored with some spiritual experiences, desiring something new and

stimulating. God's answer is call us to avoid those temptations and to remain faithful to Him alone. True holiness means keeping our lives free of beliefs and religious practices that are contrary to what God has set forth in His Word.

Holiness is not superiority

When God chose Israel "to be a people for His own possession," He made it clear that He "did not set His love on you nor choose you because you were more in number than any of the peoples, for you were the fewest of all peoples" (Deut. 7:6,7). The Hebrew word translated in this passage as "fewest" literally means a "splinter." In this figure of speech, Israel is not depicted as a large stately tree. They are like the smallest piece of wood that gets into your skin and causes great discomfort.

This is a picture of humility, not about our intrinsic worthiness or being "holier than thou" or a sense of superiority. It is all about God's sovereignty to do as He sees fit and the great privilege we have to be part of His plan.

Holiness is not just avoidance or control

"You shall be holy for I am holy." The ways that people respond to this command in Lev. 11:45 are diverse. In some aspects of Christianity you will find people becoming ascetics and monks, isolating themselves from others. Avoidance is also a common characteristic of cults.

In Judaism, holiness is generally considered to be an expression of maintaining control over all aspects of life. It's been called becoming a master over your passions. Keeping kosher, for example, is a way of demonstrating your control over

what you eat, thus exercising separation from others who do not maintain that control.

There is certainly an element of truth to that emphasis. But the downside to such practices is that they often lead to an ever-widening measure of control. Not eating certain foods has led to avoiding Gentiles who eat non-kosher foods (even if you do not consume the foods yourself). Avoiding the pagan practices of the Canaanites such as boiling a kid in its mother's milk in biblical times (Ex. 34:26) has led to avoiding eating meat and dairy in the same meal in modern times.

But the problem is more than steadfastly refusing to eat cheeseburgers. Because, as human beings, we can never reach the ultimate standard of true holiness, which is...

Holiness is a function of perfection

How many sins did it take for Adam and Eve to be separated from God and His blessings and ultimately from life itself? Just one. As Ezekiel further reminds us, "the soul who sins will die" (Ezek. 18:4). Just one sin.

By virtue of being the descendants of Adam and Eve, and thus sinners ourselves, we, too, are separated from God, from His many blessings, and from eternal life until we become righteous and holy. Would you expect God to settle for anything less? Eternity is a long time to spend with impure, unrighteous, unholy beings.

The problem is that you cannot make yourself holy because you cannot make yourself perfect. God is the one who makes us holy. Here is how that happens...

"By this will we have been sanctified (made holy/set

apart) through the offering of the body of Messiah Yeshua once for all. And every priest stands daily ministering and offering time after time the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins; but He, having offered one sacrifice for sins for all time, sat down at the right hand of God, waiting from that time onward until His enemies be made a footstool for His feet. For by one offering He has perfected for all time those who are sanctified." (Heb. 10:10-14)

As one who never sinned, Yeshua (Jesus) lived the only perfect life in history. And as one who died in innocence, He became the perfect atonement. Unlike the High Priest who had to repeat the atonement sacrifices year after year, Yeshua's sacrifice only needed to occur one time and would have enduring results. After all, can you improve upon perfection? From that day forward when Yeshua willingly gave His life for people like us who have committed one sin or a million, God says, "Their sins and their lawless deeds I will remember no more" (Heb. 10:17).

When we believe that He died for our sins, God does something incredible. He imputes—or credits—His own righteous perfection to us. God then considers us as being worthy to be in His presence forever because our sins are forgiven, as far as the east is from the west (Ps. 103:12). In this way, God can say, "You are no longer separate from me. Instead, you are set apart from all others who have not received this free gift. You are truly holy for I am holy."

Holiness signifies that we are different

Is there something different about you that others will notice? Yeshua 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" (Matt. 5:16).

I was once approached by a ten year-old boy after I spoke at a church. He told me, "My dad 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. I encouraged him to be a 'living book'—living his life just as the Bible teaches us to do—by being obedient and loving and kind and serving others. I said, "When we do that, sooner or later people 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 synagogue while your neighbors stay at home or go to the movies. It's not just about keeping kosher or practicing 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 being giving for the benefit of others?
- When cursing and rudeness abound, are you blessing people with words of kindness?
- When individuals are telling gossip and holding grudges, are you in control of your tongue and forgiving others?

These are the characteristics of a life that has been changed by God through the power of the Holy Spirit who transforms us into a new creation (2 Cor. 5:17). This is the kind of holiness that God desires from us—people who are redeemed from their sins and act like they understand what He has done for us.

Holiness calls us to worship with other believers

The writer to the Hebrews makes this exhortation:

“Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for He who promised is faithful; and let us consider how to stimulate one another to love and good deeds, not forsaking our own assembling together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another; and all the more,

as you see the day drawing near” (Heb. 10:23-25).

Whenever we get together with other believers we set ourselves apart from the rest of the world. It becomes a time that is separate from our daily routines. In keeping with the definition of holiness, it is a time dedicated to worshipping the Lord, praying and studying His Word.

Holiness means we are set apart as witnesses

The great mistake that many advocates of holiness make is that they turn inward, isolating themselves from those who are unholy. The emphasis is on hard separation, not being set apart for a purpose. The biblical model is very different. Repeatedly in Scripture we see how persons who had become redeemed then are called to go to others with the message of salvation.

“While they were ministering to the Lord and fasting, 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 the church in the New Testament. Being holy means we can be both of these things. We are called to be set apart from the values and practices of those who do not believe in the True and Living God. Yet we are also called to be set apart to reach them with the Good News.

That means we cannot live in isolation. We have to become involved in the lives of others, all-the-while being wise about how they can influence us in return. Ultimately, however, we have the great resource of the Holy Spirit working on our behalf, so we must rely upon His guiding, His conviction and His indwelling.

God is indeed Holy. And that is His desire for us as well. While holiness is not a reference to God’s glory, when we set ourselves apart through faith in Yeshua and for His service, God is in fact glorified. And He is pleased to welcome us into His presence throughout eternity.

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