

Seeking God'S Will (Part One): Holiness

God's Character Is a Guide

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In the book of Ephesians (and we seem to be in this book quite often lately) after some of the deeper, more theological, spiritual teaching that Paul gives early, the apostle gives us some pointed instruction to help us focus on the truly important matters where the rubber hits the road—mostly practical matters.

This section of chapter five will serve as a foundation for our study today.

Ephesians 5:8-10 For you were once darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Walk as children of light (for the fruit of the Spirit is in all goodness, righteousness, and truth), finding out what is acceptable to the Lord.

Paul starts with a basic truth about every Christian, without exception—we were once darkness, but now we are light. This has happened because of our calling by God to Christ. However, notice how Paul phrases this. We probably would have put it this way: “We were in darkness, but now we are in the light.” But Paul does not say that. Rather, he says very clearly, “You were once darkness.” This makes it very personal, and it a whole lot worse, because we were not just in the darkness—you can be in the darkness, and not be a part of it, like some unfortunate circumstance. But, this says that you were wholly part of that darkness.

Paul’s phrasing, here, means that the darkness was part of us, and we were part of it. As a matter of fact, we were so dark, that we could not be seen in the darkness, because in darkness there is no light. There is no way to distinguish one from another. We *were* darkness. It was in us; it was us. That is terrifying to think that we lived for so long in such a state. We were corrupt and sinful in our own right.

My dad just mentioned that the sins that we do cannot be blamed on others. You cannot say that the Devil made you do them. We cannot say that anybody or anything forced us to do anything. We did it. We were sinful. We were in darkness. We were darkness. To put it in a modern way of thinking, we were willing soldiers of the dark side. We did not need Darth Vader to come along and say to us, “Come over to the dark side, Luke.” We were already there.

Yet, because God called us out of that—He helped us to believe and accept Christ as

Seeking God's Will (Part One): Holiness by Richard T. Ritenbaugh (<http://www.cgg.org>)

our Savior, and therefore to become forgiven and cleansed through that awesome sacrifice of Himself—we have now changed allegiance. We are no longer darkness; we are light in the Lord. This shows you—in the Lord—how we came out of it, and how we stay out of it. It is because of our attachment to Jesus Christ.

What He has done, and His life now lived in us by the Spirit, make us light. If you were to turn back to John 1 you would see that He is that light. That is one of His great traits. He is light. And, we have a chance to be a part of that light too through Him.

Now, our thankful response to this wonderful change of circumstances—going from darkness to light—is to walk as children of light. That is what Paul said here in Ephesians 5—you were once darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Walk as children of light.

Walk, of course, is the normal, biblical way of talking about the conduct of our life. So, our response to being pulled out of darkness—not only being pulled out, but being made light, the darkness flushed from us, and given a new chance in life to be something a whole lot better—our thankful response is to respond in kind to what God did for us.

So our calling to the light means that we must represent that light in the world in every deed we do and word that we speak. So because we are no longer darkness, but light, it is our job to conduct ourselves in light. We must live as light to this world. And of course, Jesus Christ exhortations in Matthew 5:16 comes to mind, “Let your light so shine before men.” That is what we are supposed to be doing—letting our lights shine.

Now, let us go on. That was only verse 8.

Verse 9 is a parenthetical statement. Paul is explaining or defining what kind of conduct he means when he said by walking as children of light. To put it in a general way, he starts out with the fruit of the Spirit—the things we are supposed to say and do are the work of the Holy Spirit in us. So, as he says here, our words and deeds should be all in goodness, righteousness, and truth. Those are very broad categories, but they cover a great deal, too—goodness are things like God is; righteousness is “right-wise-ness,” deeds being done properly; and truth, of course, is knowledge of the truth, doing things in truth, etc.

But, when we were in darkness we could not do any of those things. And, I should leave it at that. They could not be done. We might have been able to do something that had a bit of truth in it, or to speak a bit of truth, but it was not really true, because it was mixed with error. Things that we tried to do that were good, were not *truly* good, because they

Seeking God's Will (Part One): Holiness by Richard T. Ritenbaugh (<http://www.cgg.org>)

were mixed with selfishness, wanting something in return. Of course, things that we tried to do in righteousness were *truly not* righteousness for that same reason, not being based on the truth, but on error.

So, now that we are out of darkness—there is not darkness in us in the way that it was before—we can now do these things. Now we have the desire, ability, and strength through God's Spirit to do goodness, righteousness, and truth. It can be done. We are encouraged to be doing those things by the help of the Holy Spirit in us. We can do good. We can be righteous. We can speak truth.

Verse 10 is especially practical for all of us. We should read this as a continuation of verse 8 because, sometimes parenthetical material when it comes between two parts of a sentence can make us lose our train of thought. "Walk as children of light. . . . [proving] finding out what is acceptable to the Lord." That is Paul's main idea in all of this. But, he threw us a bit of a monkey wrench in the midst.

"Walk as children of light. . . . [proving] finding out what is acceptable to the Lord." This is very interesting. Remember that I said that this is the practical part of it. This should be very encouraging for us. Remember that in I Corinthians 1, Paul tells us that we are the foolish, weak, base, and despised of this world. But, what this means (verse 10 of Ephesians 5) is that though we are the foolish, weak, base, and despised of this world, it does not mean that we have to have great wisdom, or education, or to be a great thinker or philosopher to know what is acceptable to God. All we have to do is what God says, "Walk as children of light. . . . [proving] finding out what is acceptable to the Lord." It is the walking as children of light that helps us to prove what is acceptable to the Lord. So, if you do what God says, you will prove what He expects of us.

This is reminiscent of Psalm 111:10.

Psalm 111:10 The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom; a good understanding have all those who do His commandments. His praise endures forever.

So if you do God's commandments, He adds understanding. This is most easily seen in terms of "truth," but it can also be seen in other areas of conduct. Herbert W. Armstrong used this principle many years ago back in the 20s or early 30s in trying to come to understand the holy days. He saw there in Leviticus 23 that they were very clearly delineated and clearly commanded. Then he would flip over to the New Testament, and see that just about every one of them was recorded as also being kept by Jesus Christ

and the apostles.

So he knew that they were not done away with. They were kept by Christ, but others say that because He was sacrificed, that did away with the commandments to keep the holy days, right? NO, not at all. As you continue on into the Acts and the epistles, the apostles were continuing to keep these holy days. They did not think (those who knew best because they were on the scene) that those holy days had been done away with.

That was a good reason for keeping them. And so, Herbert Armstrong proceeded to keep them, but he did not really know what they meant yet. All he knew was that God commanded them, and he determined that they must have meaning. But, what was that meaning?

It took him about seven years of keeping them and studying as they came and went year after year until it rang a bell that what God was doing was showing His plan through these holy days. Of course, it was God who revealed this to him over those years of keeping and studying them.

So, he faithfully kept the command to keep the holy days even though he did not know why at first. This principle is that if you do what God says to do; then He will eventually give you understanding of why you need to do them, pointing you toward a fuller understanding of what He is doing, what He needs from us, and what He wants us to do—where we are going.

This principle, then, of walking as children of light, proving what is acceptable to the Lord we have seen from Herbert Armstrong's experience, and having observed it in ours and other people's experiences too, is that something will click about why we do something or why God wants us to do something, simply through the act of submitting to God's will and commandments, showing us eventually the reasons why we do such things.

So, to obey God's commands to do something, whatever it happens to be, God responds to by giving us understanding. And, it may be a long time before it becomes complete. He may test our obedience. He may see how long we will do a thing that He commands without understanding—testing our loyalty. But, eventually, He will give understanding. As I have said before, this includes everything, not just the holy days. He will do the same with other commands.

Think about this one: Jesus told Peter to forgive 70 times 7. That is a hard thing. Jesus said to do it. And there are times when we might say, "Okay, I am willing to forgive up to

Seeking God's Will (Part One): Holiness by Richard T. Ritenbaugh (<http://www.cgg.org>)

three or five times.” But Christ said to keep on forgiving. And so, we may not know why He says to keep on forgiving. We might have an intellectual understanding of why to keep on forgiving, but it is not except through the experience that we have by continuing to forgive that the real meaning comes out.

There are other ones too, like, “Be swift to hear, and slow to speak.” That is a hard one too. Most of us in a conversation are just screaming to get our word in there. Or, to counsel one another. We want to tell these people what to do! But, no, the command through James is, “Listen, and be very slow to speak.” This is especially true when it comes to a misunderstanding, or controversy, because you should want to hear what the other side has to say and be very reticent about giving your opinion, because most likely it is going to embroil matters even more.

Of course, the next thing said in that verse, is, “slow to wrath.”

So, you can see the escalation—sort of listening and then you jump in there with your opinion, and pretty soon you are rolling on the floor trading blows with this person (maybe not in actual fact). It escalates into an argument; who knows where it will go from there—feud, murder, or any number of other awful things. But, if you had just, from the very beginning been swift to hear and slow to speak, it would have never escalated.

How about the one that simply says, “Submit to one another”? That is difficult, is it not? How often do we do this? But, Christ says to do this. Sometimes we do not know why we should submit to this other person. Who is this other person, anyway? Who does he think he is? We can find all sorts of reasons why we should not submit to that other person. But God says that we should submit to one another. This is another area where we can walk as children of light and prove what is acceptable to the Lord. But, it takes us obeying the command before eventually God gives the understanding.

So, I want to warn you, and you have probably seen it, that doing this is not easy at all—doing the commands and waiting for the explanation. It is not an easy thing to do. It is actually an act of faith. Acts of faith are by definition difficult. They are stepping out into the unknown or into areas in which we are not sure what is going to happen. And usually when people see us doing an act of faith, they think that we are crazy, illogical, foolish, and should react differently giving all sorts of reasons why we should not step out in faith. But if we persist in doing this, in following God’s commands in faith, the fruits will show that it is good. God will at some point in the future reveal why He wants us to do it.

And then, one of the great rewards of it is that we grow in faith, righteousness, and

godly character.

Let us go on a little further in Ephesians 5 because he continues the theme of walking after he goes through a bit more about having no fellowship with the evil works of darkness and such. He tells us to wake up, Christ will give us light, and then he says,

Ephesians 5:15-17 See then that you walk circumspectly, not as fools but as wise, redeeming the time, because the days are evil. Therefore do not be unwise, but understand what the will of the Lord is.

This is very similar to what we just read in verses 5 through 10. Paul is still on the subject of Christian conduct. So he admonishes us, here, to conduct ourselves “circumspectly.” In the Latin where the word came from, “circumspectly” means “to see around.” We are being taught to look around; walk keeping our eyes open all around us seeing what is going on. The idea is that we are to walk as Christians with our eyes wide open, to walk vigilantly, watchfully, and (I like this one best) to walk being careful to consider all circumstances and possible consequences.

This means that we have to have a 360° view of what is going on. We then have to be able to extrapolate what is going on and what will result if you take this step in this direction or if you take that step in that direction. Do you understand what Paul is saying, here? He is saying that we have to walk through our Christian lives being able to determine at any moment whether any of our actions will cause “X,” “Y,” or “Z.”

You have to be a thinker to be a Christian. We cannot just go blundering our way through life and hope that it is going to come out all right in the end. God wants us to really be intent on what is going on in our lives.

We have to view life wisely, and make sure that we act, and react properly, always bearing in mind that we are children of light and representatives of God. Every step we take, every decision we make, will either glorify Him or worse bring dishonor to Him.

We must be thinking about that at all times. Paul says in the very next verse, “redeeming the time.” This is a good enough translation, but I think that the way we should think of it is “take advantage of the opportunity.” Redeeming the time is a bit of an archaic way of thinking about it. But, if we take advantage of the opportunity, then that makes sense to us. We have to take advantage of our opportunities to learn and to grow, being children of light, because as Paul says, the world is not getting any better. Take advantage of the time, now, because things are only going to get worse.

Use these opportunities now, because later on it may be too hard to walk as children of light. Do it now.

Another way to phrase this is, “Be urgent to grow.” Be urgent to put on God’s character—the image of Christ. Put on God’s mind. Take advantage of the things that come up in life—whether trials or mundane situations—use them for applying what you know of God’s way of life. Redeem the time. Take advantage of the opportunity. Do not let one pass by because God may have put it there (probably did) so you could take advantage of it and grow thereby, learning a good lesson.

Then, Paul goes into verse 17. To behave wisely, we need to “understand what the will of the Lord is.” But, here is also where the sermon takes a turn, as I begin to truly aim for the goal today.

There are situations that arise in our lives when we do not know what God’s will is, where we may be absolutely clueless about God’s will in that particular situation. Something comes up, and we think, “Okay, Genesis...uh, no...Exodus, uh,...I cannot think of a single thing in the whole Bible—chapter, verse—that will help me get through this situation. This thing has never come up in the history of the world!” (I am being facetious.) So, we do not know what our course of action should be.

Perhaps we cannot think of an example from the Gospels, such as Christ’s actions, and are not able to use them as a basis for what we need to do. Of course, it could be any person’s example from the scriptures who did something right, and God commended them for it. And so, we could have cued in on that. But, no, there is not anything that quite matches what my particular problem/situation is.

How do we know in such situations what the will of the Lord is? How can we behave wisely if we cannot figure out what God’s will is in that particular situation?

This idea—How do we know what God’s will is?—is going to be the overriding theme of a series of sermons I am beginning today with this one.

How can we determine the will of God in any situation? I will try through these sermons to give you a particular help. You probably already know this, but maybe I can help you specifically in the various character traits of God to do this. That is basically what I am going to be doing.

We can know what God’s will is in any particular situation if we know the character of God Himself. This is the kernel of my idea for these sermons. The more that you know

God, the better you know Him and His character, the more you know of each of His individual traits and what they imply to us, then that gives us a good head start in coming to understand what He wants us to do, because He acts out of His own character. If we know His character, then we can transfer some of that to our own decision making. By doing that and by using the mind of Christ to make our own decisions, then we grow into that mind ourselves. We start making that mind a part of our everyday decisions in greater ways.

Now, this is simple to say and fairly easy to understand in principle. I see many of you nodding your heads yes. If you know the character of God, you can make a decision parallel to that, which will agree with God's character.

But, did you know we have limitations? It is because of our limitations—such as being physical human beings. We truly have only limited knowledge that barely registers on the scale of godly knowledge; and we are still fighting the pulls of human nature to a horrible degree—therefore it is hard to translate the godly character that we see in God's Word, or have learned through experience and put it into practical application. It is hard to translate that principle into action, behavior, and conduct.

But, I think that if we start doing this, if we start really thinking about God's character and how it applies—how God would do something if He were in our shoes—then it would definitely narrow our options when you have to make the decision; because if the option is doing something that God would do versus something that God would not do, then obviously we can eliminate all the wrong ones. This helps us to narrow our options.

We have already touched on part of this principle without actually pointing to it yet. It appears in the very first verse that we read, Ephesians 5:8, and is in the phrase, "Walk as children of light." John 8 shows this principle most completely and clearly. In this passage, Jesus is in an argument with the Jews, and they were trying to tell Him that they had never been in bondage, which is silly. But, he was telling them that the reason why they were in bondage was because they were listening to the wrong "father."

John 8:37-44 "I know that you are Abraham's descendants, but you seek to kill Me, because My word has no place in you. I speak what I have seen with My Father, and you do what you have seen with your father." They answered and said to Him, "Abraham is our father." Jesus said to them, "If you were Abraham's children, you would do the works of Abraham. But now you seek to kill Me, a Man who has told you the truth which I heard from God. Abraham did not do this. You do the deeds of your father." Then they said to Him, "We were not born of fornication; we have one Father—God." Jesus

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said to them, "If God were your Father, you would love Me, for I proceeded forth and came from God; nor have I come of Myself, but He sent Me. Why do you not understand My speech? Because you are not able to listen to My word. You are of your father the devil, and the desires of your father you want to do. He was a murderer from the beginning, and does not stand in the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he speaks a lie, he speaks from his own resources, for he is a liar and the father of it.

The principle is very clear, here. Jesus said it several times: People do like their parents did. So, if we are to walk as children of light, then our parent should be the One of Light—God. Children take on and repeat the beliefs and behaviors of their parents. In the Old Testament, there was a very well-known phrase, "Sons of Belial." It is very clear that Belial in most cases is not a person, but a thing—worthlessness and wickedness. It came to mean lawlessness. So, these people were being told—these sons of Belial—that they were acting wickedly, because they were the sons of wickedness, worthlessness, or lawlessness.

Here in John 8 Christ said that the sons of Abraham should copy the works of Abraham, right? And the children of the Devil mimic Satan. That is exactly how it works. The children of God, just as Paul said in Ephesians 5:8 should be following the examples of God the Father and Jesus Christ, who obviously have the same character.

This is the principle that we follow of what our parents are; who we look to.

We can also see this principle, again, in a clear command in I John 2.

I John 2:6 He who says he abides in Him ought himself also to walk just as He walked.

In this case it is put a little more plainly that we are to follow—walk in the same way, have the same conduct and behavior—as Jesus Christ did, because we say, we confess, that we are His people.

We come to the next passage often during the Passover season.

I Peter 2:21 For to this you were called, because Christ also suffered for us, leaving us an example, that you should follow His steps:

This is all the same principle. I am just showing it to you in different ways. We walk as children of light. In other words, as we found here, we follow Christ's example. We imitate Him in everything.

There is another in John 13:15, where Jesus in the context of service said, "I have given you an example that you should do as I have done to you." Here, He is talking specifically about the foot-washing service, but in the broader sense, He is talking about His own way of serving.

We need to mimic or copy what He has done. We have known this principle for a long time. I know that I am not telling you anything new. A Christian is a follower of Christ, by definition. And to follow Him is not only to believe in Him, but to also do as He told us in everything, doing as He did Himself. It is very elementary.

Paul writes in I Corinthians 11:1, "Imitate me, as I imitate Christ." It is very foundational. We all know this. This is all part of the same principle that I am trying to get across, that if we know God's character, then we can do it, following it.

You may have thought of this as I was going through it. In recent years some Protestants have capitalized on this idea with, "What Would Jesus Do?" They have t-shirts, jewelry, and what-not with this saying on them, making a lot of money by doing so.

This is along the same idea. These things provide good foundations for the principle we are looking at today. If we can find and use the examples of Jesus or His words and actions as Lord, in the Old Testament, then we can be confident that we are on the right track in making a decision. We can do what Paul said and imitate it. And as we come to understand, then, we can come to a better way of manifesting our understanding of Christ's way of life from our hearts.

Simply stated again: We can determine the will of God from the words and deeds of God in Scripture.

But unfortunately for us, life is not simple. This world is not simple. Our relationships with each other and especially with those on the outside are not simple. There are a lot of different things that come into play. Our responsibilities tend to be many, and our loyalties are often divided. So, it is very difficult to find particular verses or examples that fit some of the problems we encounter.

We often realize this to our dismay—that the Bible rarely provides a clear-cut example

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for every situation that you may find yourself in. It takes a lot of thinking, and it takes an ability to apply principle to the matter. This is a hard thing for people who live concrete lives to apply principle to a situation.

At this point when we figure out that the Bible does not explicitly have the answer that we need (we think), is when we fall on our knees and beseech God to reveal His will to us—to come in and intervene and give us guidance, sending us an answer. “Reach down and solve the problem for us!” Even, “Work on that other person for a change, instead of me!” Or, however we might approach Him with, asking Him for help.

Now, we can thank God that He often has pity on us, and helps us in our ignorance and helplessness. However, it is my contention that we can do better. We *should* be doing better. We should not need to cry out to God for help every time some little thing comes up. We can ask Him for wisdom and that sort of thing, but by the time we have been in the church of God for 10, 15, or 20 years, we should know how to solve some of these problems ourself. We should know that since God’s character is this particular way, and we have known this from the beginning, then if we follow the principle of that character in the ways we deal with each other, then the correct answer should come to mind.

The problem is that the correct answer often means that we have to submit, be humble, bite our tongue, or some other thing we do not want to do. But, if we have a good line on what God’s character is, then we can make a good decision and not need God to intervene on our behalf.

He wants us to grow to be like Him. He wants to see growth in us. He wants to see us being more righteous. He wants to see us having and using the mind of Christ. Of course, if He sees that in us, then He is going to give us more aid. He might give us more tests or trials, too, because we are ready for the next level. But, we need to be doing this, because we need to put on the mind of Christ. So, we need to enhance our growth in godly character, and this is one way that we can do it.

Turn to Jeremiah 31, and we will see in the Old Testament that this idea is already present. This passage obviously has Israel in mind in particular. In fact, it is Israel in the future that He has in mind here. But, as we know, we are the Israel of God, (Galatians 6:16) and so these things are being fulfilled in type in us first. So, this applies to you and me, today, first of all, most of all.

Jeremiah 31:33-34 "But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the LORD: I will put My law in their minds, and write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be My people.

Seeking God's Will (Part One): Holiness by Richard T. Ritenbaugh (<http://www.cgg.org>)

No more shall every man teach his neighbor, and every man his brother, saying, 'Know the LORD,' for they all shall know Me, from the least of them to the greatest of them, says the LORD. For I will forgive their iniquity, and their sin I will remember no more."

This applies first to us. He has made the New Covenant with us already. We are the forerunners of this. He has put His law in our hearts and minds; He has forgiven our sins; and He has made us His people. We are part of His Family.

But, did you notice something in verse 34? He said that every man and his neighbor will not be going around, saying, "Know the Lord," because you all already know Him. He is saying that there is going to come a time when we will not have to be encouraging one another to get to know God a little bit better, because we will already know Him.

We have already been brought into an intimate relationship with Him; we have been given all the tools necessary; the gates of heaven are wide open; the curtain has been ripped from top to bottom; the way in has been made available to us—Jesus Christ is there at God's right hand interceding for us, mediating for us; everything has been given to us—how well do you know the Lord?

That is the question.

If you know the Lord, you can solve a lot of problems. You could make a ton of good decisions. So, do I have to say to you, "Know the Lord?" I should not have to. Let this be an encouragement to know the Lord, so that we can reach the point where we have the mind of Christ as fully as we possibly can.

Do we have a firm grasp on His character? I am sure that we could name a lot of His attributes. He is loving, faithful, kind, merciful, just, patient, holy, omnipotent, joyful, longsuffering, gentle, forgiving; and we could go on and on with His character. But, do we really understand what these mean? It is not just a matter of knowing what the character trait is, but understanding how it works, and what it means.

What does it mean to be truly kind? What does it mean to be faithful? What does it mean to be just? As well as being merciful? Those two almost seem like opposites—justice, and mercy. But God is both. He balances them perfectly.

And further than all that—knowing what they mean—how do they apply to practical living? We can say that God is just, but how do we make that something that we actually

Seeking God's Will (Part One): Holiness by Richard T. Ritenbaugh (<http://www.cgg.org>)

do? We may have an idea, but maybe we need to understand His justice better so that we have a finer understanding of it, making better decisions when it comes to do that. What is just, and what is merciful?

These sermons I am going to be giving over the next assignments will be designed to help us understand some of God's character traits, so that we can determine what His will is in any situation. And I am talking practical situations. Not just overarching situations, but becoming a bit more practical. That will be the most difficult part—how to translate His character traits into practical speech and actions on our part.

I will not be giving you answers. I am going to be giving you examples so that you can, then, think about them, meditate upon them, and understand their application in your life.

We are going to start this search into God's character and traits with *holiness*. I chose holiness in particular because I feel that it is the foundation of all of His other characteristics; first there is holiness, and then out of His holiness springs all the other characteristics. His holiness is what sets Him apart from everything else in the universe. So, holiness is the foundation for all the other characteristics. That makes it the best place to start.

Out of His holiness springs love, mercy, patience, justice, righteousness, and so forth. There is even a verse, which in the English Standard Version I think reads best, found in Isaiah 5:16 that says, "The Holy God shows Himself holy in righteousness." This means that His holiness stands above His righteousness, and His righteousness is just an out-flow of His holiness. If His holiness is there, His righteousness reveals it. So it is apparent in that one example that holiness is first, and then comes all the other traits.

Let us begin, especially when speaking about holiness, in I Peter. Here we have a foundational commandment to all of us.

I Peter 1:15-16 But as He who called you is holy, you also be holy in all your conduct, because it is written, "Be holy, for I am holy."

He takes that from three places—Leviticus 11:44-45; Leviticus 19:2; and Leviticus 20:7. If you have a Bible with marginal references, you will probably find most of them there. So, it is mentioned at least three times in the Old Testament this very same thing, "Be holy, because I am holy."

Seeking God's Will (Part One): Holiness by Richard T. Ritenbaugh (<http://www.cgg.org>)

We have heard enough sermons on holiness to understand that the Old Testament and the New Testament words are “kadash,” and “haggios.” Both of these words imply “separation.” They also imply consecration for a special use, meaning that they are dedicated for some particular use. Oftentimes, a thing will be dedicated or consecrated for use in the Temple or tabernacle. And so, it is put aside for that use only. If God dedicated a plate for use in the Temple, that plate could not be used for anything else. It had to be used only for its particular purpose in the tabernacle. So it means that a thing has been chosen for one particular thing, and it is separated—consecrated, dedicated—to that, and nothing else.

There is one more definition, and that is “difference.” Something that is holy is different. It is not the same as other things. It is different, and therefore separate from something else. In fact, the Hebrew root word for “kadash” means cutting or cutting out a separate thing from the whole. For instance, cutting out a square of leather from a whole pelt or hide. That piece that is cut out is made into something else. That particular piece that was cut out, you could say was “holy,” in that it was separated out for a particular use.

It can be used in other ways, not just in objects like this. It can be an action where a cowboy rides out to a herd of cattle, and he only wants that particular one (right there with the big horns). So he rides up to the herd, lasso in hand, and proceeds to “cut out” that particular animal from the herd. Maybe he wants it for slaughter or set aside for breeding. But, it makes no difference why. He wants to separate that one from the rest.

This is exactly what God does. He chose us from the rest of humanity. He went in there riding and got us lassoed around the neck (so to speak) and pulled us out of darkness into His marvelous light.

So, this is the idea, here.

Now, from that developed another idea. That is, not only is it cut out, but the thing is also better or more excellent. The use it is going to be put to is better than the rest. For instance, this animal will no longer run with the herd, but will be used for breeding, which is a better purpose. So at this point, that animal is a cut above all the others in the herd, because it has some quality that the others do not have.

Not only was it cut out, it is a cut above; it is better than; it has a bit of excellence; it has quality that the others do not have.

The idea of holiness moves from merely separating to being used for a purpose, and then proceeding to having worth—unique and therefore special.

So then, something that is holy is normally considered to be excellent of quality. There is something special, rare, and unique about it.

This idea flows into the New Testament also because all the apostles and Jesus Christ Himself were Jews who brought the idea with them into their teaching. But rather than causing Christians to live separately, which the Jews tried to do, as Israel did living separate from the nations, Christians were called out of the nations, but they still lived within the nations where they were called. So, rather than Christians having to live separately from the pagans around them, they were admonished to be separate, different, unique, special, and of higher quality in their belief, thoughts, words, and deeds.

The holiness became something more than just physical separation. As a matter of fact, that particular idea diminished in importance to the point that the difference is between the ears, in your mind and heart. That is what God wants to be especially different from those around them.

And because He has given us His Spirit, this has made us different, and made us one with Him. It has made us a cut above—not to get the big head about it—but, it has put us on a level where we have the ability to communicate and have a relationship with God. That makes us very different and unique among all the people of this world. We are holy. That is why you are called a saint. You are one of the holy ones.

You are holy, first of all, because of what God had done for you. He has accounted us to be holy by His grace. So, we are separated in that way. But, there is another level of holiness. It is not just the imputed kind, but it is the kind that we grow in. It becomes part of us because our heart changes. Our hearts become “hearts of flesh” and not of stone. Our hearts become like God’s heart. When it gets to that point, then we are truly holy. That is what God wants us to do. He wants us to soften our hearts and become like Him, to be separate from all others in the way that you think, what you do, the purity of everything, just as He is.

In other words, we are to be holy by living lives of moral purity and unswerving loyalty and devotion to God. That is where our holiness comes in. This is what we have to do. This is what makes us different, other than the fact that He gives us His Spirit.

Let us see some of this. The apostles admonish us on this point time and again.

Ephesians 1:3-4 Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in

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Christ, just as He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world, [why?] that we should be holy and without blame before Him in love.

Philippians 2:14-16 Do all things without complaining and disputing, that you may become blameless and harmless, children of God without fault in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, among whom you shine as lights in the world, holding fast the word of life, so that I may rejoice in the day of Christ that I have not run in vain or labored in vain.

Here, it does not use the word “holy,” but he uses the words “harmless,” “blameless,” and “without fault in the midst of this world.” That is our job. That is what God wants us to do in becoming holy as He is.

I Peter 2:11-12 Beloved, I beg you as sojourners and pilgrims, abstain from fleshly lusts which war against the soul, having your conduct honorable among the Gentiles, that when they speak against you as evildoers, they may, by your good works which they observe, glorify God in the day of visitation.

Again, holy is not used here, but the idea of moral purity is obviously there and comes across to us. We are to give a good witness before the world.

I Peter 4:1-2 Therefore, since Christ suffered for us in the flesh, arm yourselves also with the same mind, for he who has suffered in the flesh has ceased from sin, that he no longer should live the rest of his time in the flesh for the lusts of men, but for the will of God.

Here we have four different commands by the apostles Peter and Paul that we are to live lives that are separate and different, blameless, holy. We should not have any reproach to our character in the way that we live from those who are outside.

This is our job—to be holy as God is holy. This is a big job.

Please notice Mark 7. I encourage you to read this chapter down to at least verse 23. This is one area of dispute that Christ had with the Jews. Let us read the first few verses.

Mark 7:1-9 Then the Pharisees and some of the scribes came together to Him, having come from Jerusalem. Now when they saw some of His disciples eat bread with defiled, that is, with unwashed hands, they found fault. For the Pharisees and all the Jews do not eat unless they wash their hands in a special way, holding the tradition of the elders. When they come from the marketplace, they do not eat unless they wash. And there are many other things which they have received and hold, like the washing of cups, pitchers, copper vessels, and couches. Then the Pharisees and scribes asked Him, "Why do Your disciples not walk according to the tradition of the elders, but eat bread with unwashed hands?" He answered and said to them, "Well did Isaiah prophesy of you hypocrites, as it is written: 'This people honors Me with their lips, but their heart is far from Me. And in vain they worship Me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men.' For laying aside the commandment of God, you hold the tradition of men—the washing of pitchers and cups, and many other such things you do." He said to them, "All too well you reject the commandment of God, that you may keep your tradition."

And then He gives the example of how they pretty much had abrogated the 5th commandment, "Honor your mother and father," with their other law of "corban." That is the situation here in this passage.

Here is where we see most clearly the difference between the ritual and the practical concepts of holiness. The Jews should have been able to see the idea of the holiness of God wanted them to understand, which was that it is a moral idea, not just a physical idea in the sense of plates and cups and ritual washings. It is very clear in the Old Testament that His holiness was something that was a part of Him. It was the way that He acted, He thought, and the decisions that He made. He was separate and had a moral law that He was trying to teach them that would allow them to do the same thing.

Now this is very clear. In fact, it said in I Peter 1:15-16 to, "be holy because I am holy." If we were to go back to Leviticus 11 or 19 or 20, we would see that the context in which it was said was not about ritual things. In fact, what surrounds it are things like Sabbath-keeping, honoring your parents, do not steal, do not defraud your neighbor, do not commit adultery, among other things. You see, He said that you should be holy because He is holy in context of moral imperatives and commands.

The holiness that He was trying to get across to Israel had nothing to do with plates and cups. It everything to do with how we act, think, speak, and work. The Jews in this

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context (Mark 7) had been following ritual laws added by their elders, and they kept them as traditions to make themselves externally different and clean—they wore the phylacteries, bobbing on the street corners while saying their prayers. They washed a certain way before eating—and it did set them apart from other people—externally. Oh! There is a Jew! He must be an orthodox one!

But, Jesus castigates them because they laid aside God's commandments. They treated God's commandments as inferior to the necessity of doing all these traditions. So if it came to a question between whether they would wash their hands, cups, plates, or whatever, and doing one of God's commandments (honoring your father and mother), well they would obviously do the washings, because they thought it was more important—it was a tradition of the elders!

So we have in this passage above, continuing on in verses 10 through 13 His example of reminding them that God said to honor your father and mother, but they said that if they gave the monetary offering to the Temple instead, mom and dad will never see it and never know, and God will love me because I gave it to Him instead.

They would selfishly do this sort of ritual thing, and as He said, make the word of God of no effect.

Jesus is drawing a very clear distinction between ritual holiness observed in the Temple and traditions, and the spiritual holiness—the moral holiness—that He wanted to get across to them. He tells them, then, as He went on, that what is truly defiling is not dirt. God made dirt. It serves a good purpose. It does not make you defiled. All it does is make you dirty. Dirt has no moral standing. It is dirt.

But what is defiling are the things that are in and come out of the heart—all those sins that He, then, lists as you go through verses 20 through 23. Those are the things that defile a man. They come out of a man. It is not something from the outside in, which needed washings.

You may wish to jot down I John 3:2-3 to read later. What you will find in this passage is that holiness is linked to purity. If you want to be holy like God, then, you will purify yourself just as He is pure.

What we are being shown throughout the New Testament is that holiness is linked to this moral purity that God has. That is what separates Him from other things. It makes Him totally different. It is amazing that it says that you will purify yourselves—everyone who has this hope in him purifies himself as He is pure. Wow! That is a big job.

But, if you want to see Christ when He comes back and be a part of that first resurrection, that is the job you must do—purify yourself as He is pure.

So, how does this help us to know what the will of God is?

Knowing God's holiness may not give you a clear course of action. But it will certainly help to eliminate many bad options. Of course, in any situation, if there is an immoral and moral choices, you can obviously eliminate the immoral ones.

God's holiness is a massive under-girding principle. That is why I started with it first. All of His other traits flow from it. So, its helpfulness to us will be general, rather than specific. But, it will get us onto the right track. We should be able to use our knowledge of God's Word from that point on to guide us. At least, if we are pointed in the right direction by His holiness, then we should be able to go from there.

Please turn to Matthew 12 for one quick example. This is the situation where the Pharisees castigated Him for letting His disciples go through the fields on the Sabbath.

Matthew 12:1-4 At that time Jesus went through the grain fields on the Sabbath. And His disciples were hungry, and began to pluck heads of grain and to eat. And when the Pharisees saw it, they said to Him, "Look, Your disciples are doing what is not lawful to do on the Sabbath!" But He said to them, "Have you not read what David did when he was hungry, he and those who were with him: how he entered the house of God and ate the showbread which was not lawful for him to eat, nor for those who were with him, but only for the priests?"

This will help us get an idea of what we are dealing with here.

The showbread in the tabernacle or Temple was holy. And, it was consecrated for the priests to be eaten in the holy place, and only after it was replaced by fresh bread each Sabbath. So, what we have here is a situation where David was running from Saul. The men were famished. David came and asked the priest, there, if they had anything to eat there. They replied, "No, only the showbread, which has just come off the table. But this is for the priests." And David said it was fine for him to have it just this one time. The priest agreed, and gave them the showbread.

Normally eating the showbread would have been forbidden. He would not have been

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able to eat it. But, this was a situation in which a decision between what God commanded regarding showbread or feeding starving men had to be made. So David and the priests made the decision together.

David was able to determine that God would not hold him guilty if he and his men ate that bread. Why? It is because it was a matter of weighing the two conflicting options from a moral standpoint. He had a good understanding of God's holiness.

In this case, the choice was between feeding the starving men or obeying the ritual law concerning the showbread. As Jesus later said, "If you had known what this means, 'I desire mercy and not sacrifice,' you would not have condemned the guiltless."

Knowing this characteristic of God—His holiness and His mercy—David determined that at that one time, this rare occasion, it would be okay for the priests to allow David and his men to eat the showbread. In this case, mercy—God's holiness, His character of preserving life—was more important than following this ritual law.

So, knowing the holiness of God narrowed the decision down to the very clear choice. God valued preserving the life of David and his men over being picky about this bread. I must caution you, though, that in areas of the Sabbath and such, we should not say, "Oh, I'm doing this because it's merciful or whatever."

These situations, where we would have to make such a decision, would be life and death decisions. To give you an example I have used before, if your neighbor's house is burning, you do not stay inside your house and say, "No, I'm not going to help you because it's the Sabbath." There is a danger going on beside you. It would be good for you to go over and help them out, getting in the water line or whatever.

This principle is not something you would do every week as an excuse to break the Sabbath. You have to be very careful. But, at least you can see how understanding God's holiness, here, helped to make the correct decision.

If you are ever faced with a situation like this, such as helping a neighbor in an emergency, which is also on the Sabbath, then we can confidently go to his rescue.

But, do not throw an ox into the ditch in order to help it back out and do what we want to do.

What happened with David was a holy response to preserve life rather than to uphold mere ritual. It was a tough decision, but he understood enough of God's holiness to

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make the right decision. Jesus commends him for it here in Matthew 12.