

The Priesthood Of God (Part 3)

Holiness

John W. Ritenbaugh

Given 17-Oct-09; Sermon #960

In the previous sermon of this series, we covered a number of—actually a *surprising number*—of people who may have been involved in Abraham's settlement in the Promised Land. It was a fairly large figure that contributed to the fact that Melchizedek, a priest of the most high God, was there. We also touched on the evidence (in Exodus 19) that Israel had preached to them before the covenant was made at Mount Sinai. Now in the absence of a formerly established priesthood, that responsibility apparently fell to the first born son, or lacking that, the eldest male family member.

We traced the gradual change in the Bible in its use of the term "firstborn." Through the centuries, it gradually evolved into a title of dignity indicating preeminence, despite the fact that the person receiving it was not literally firstborn. This does not mean that "firstborn" ceased to actually mean "firstborn," but actually this dignity—this title—added to the term "firstborn," and it of course is applied to Christ.

The matter of "firstborn" touches us because the church is perceived by God to be "in Christ." God, as Hebrews 12:23 shows, designates the entire church as firstborn, because they are perceived by Him to be in Christ. And this thus reveals the title's preeminence within God purpose.

The final item covered in that sermon was a detailed explanation of the English term "priest." It indicates one who is older, who leads standing and officiating between God and His worshippers—instructing them, mediating between God and them, helping to bring them together. Remember, they are bridge builders.

We will, today, continue developing the timeline and its progression as it leads to today's church and therefore to us individually, because God's purpose for us is that we become Kings and Priests under Jesus Christ in His Kingdom. It is for this that we prepare.

Recall that both covenants... God's called-out ones are to be a Kingdom of priests under the Old Covenant and a royal priesthood and holy nation under the New. In a priesthood, there is one quality that is especially emphasized directly and indirectly as well. We will begin in Leviticus 11.

Leviticus 11:44-45 For I am the Lord your God. You shall therefore consecrate yourselves, and you shall be holy; for I am holy. Neither shall you defile yourselves with any creeping thing that creeps on the earth. For I am the Lord who brings you up out of the land of Egypt, to be your God. You shall therefore be holy, for I am holy.

We are going to continue advancing right through the Bible, this time to Leviticus 19:2. This is a different context than the previous verse. But, again, you are going to see this same statement.

Leviticus 19:1-2 And the Lord spoke to Moses, saying, "Speak to all the congregation of the children of Israel, and say to them: 'You shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy.'"

Let us go one more chapter forward to chapter 20.

Leviticus 20:7 Consecrate yourselves therefore, and be holy, for I am the Lord your God.

We are going to leap one book to Numbers 15.

Numbers 15:37-41 Again the Lord spoke to Moses saying, "Speak to the children of Israel: "Tell them to make tassels on the corners of their garments throughout their generations, and to put a blue thread in the tassels on the corners. And you shall have the tassel, that you may look upon it and remember all the commandments of the Lord and do them, and that you may not follow the harlotry to which your own heart and your own eyes are inclined, and that you may remember and do all My commandments, and be holy for your God. I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, to be your God: I am the Lord your God."

Now not to leave the New Testament out of this, we are going to go back to the New Testament to I Peter 1.

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."

Now the focus of this command, in each place that it appears, is that likeness to God in character and purpose is essential to those who would serve Him regardless of where they might be in the overall picture of an Israelite community. In other words, by overall picture, I mean whether they were rich or poor, or whether they were a priest or a serf, or whatever you might want to think of as an Israelite. Everyone is to be holy. And as we just saw, that is not changed in the New Testament. Because the Lord is holy, those who serve Him are also to be holy.

The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia, under the article, "Holiness," page 725, in its opening paragraph—this is the opening paragraph for a very long dissertation on holiness:

It is no exaggeration to state that this element overshadows all others in the character of the deity so far as the Old Testament revelation is concerned. The lesser emphasis in the New Testament is readily accounted for on the assumption that the massive presentation under the Old Covenant is accepted as the underlying presupposition.

Now the last statement about the New Covenant—they are saying that apparently the apostles who wrote those epistles, and so forth, did not think that there needed to be further explanation in the New Testament. There was already sufficient information in the Old Testament. What was in the Old Testament was also to be achieved by those under the New Covenant.

We are going to go back to Exodus again. This time to Exodus 15; I just want to look at one scripture. This is in the Song of Moses after they crossed the Red Sea.

Exodus 15:11 Who is like You, O Lord, among the gods? Who is like You, glorious in holiness, fearful in praises, doing wonders?

What Moses is saying is that the God that we worship is one who cannot be confused with any others. He is not a god devised by men. He stands apart from and above His creation in respect to any quality admired by mankind. And as such, He demands our exclusive worship and allegiance.

I am giving this because "holiness" is the term that identifies God's uniqueness. He is different from—He cannot be adequately compared to any other god that men might choose. Any other god that men might choose is going to be of their own creation, and they cannot create anything near what God actually is in His existence.

The most striking difference between the Old Testament and New Testament approaches is the virtual absence of purely ceremonial aspects of holiness in the New Testament coupled with a very strong emphasis to holiness as conformity to the nature of God. That lays out pretty clearly what we are to shoot for in our lives: conformity to what God is.

In Exodus 20, the commandments of course are given. It is interesting—very importantly so—that the first two commandments, even though the words "holy" or "holiness" are not addressed directly, they are indirectly; and these two commandments are in regard to the uniqueness, the holiness, of God.

Exodus 20:1-2 And God spoke all these words, saying: "I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage. You shall have no other gods before me."

Uniqueness again. Only He brought them out, only He freed them, only He enabled them to cross the Red Sea and to be a people unto Himself.

Exodus 20:4-6 You shall not make for yourself a carved image—any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth; you shall not bow down to them nor serve them. For I, the Lord your God, am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children to the third and fourth generations of those who hate me, but showing mercy to thousands [of generations], to those who love Me and keep My commandments.

Essentially what He is saying is, "Why should you ever want to worship some other God when you have Me to worship? Worshipping Me is the only way to all of the well being, to all the goodness, to all the abundant things that you want out of life. They are going to be yours whenever you strive to conform to what I am." That is to be holy.

It is God's holiness that demands exclusive worship of Him. These first two commandments reflect this. He is absolutely free from any blemish of any kind, whether in terms of morality, knowledge, understanding, wisdom, discernment, judgment, mercy, and much more besides. The Bible shows that His presence brings a human to an overpowering sense of sinfulness and filth.

He is not, however, remote from His separated people, because He shows that he is well aware of their conduct and blesses or punishes accordingly.

The terms "holy" or "holiness" are the terms that represent God's quality. He is so far above anything we can imagine. As awesome as what we can imagine it might be, as beautiful as it might be, as powerful as it might be, as wise as it might seem to us, He is still far above. He is unique.

Holiness speaks first of His infinite majesty, His immeasurable power, and His perfect righteousness. And thus we can begin to see that holiness is more than simply being moral. It speaks of attitudes and the way that we see or perceive things, as we begin to conform to His image as our life unfolds.

Holiness is most especially essential in the priesthood, as we shall see as this subject is developed. Because the Christian church is a priesthood in training, this command to be holy takes on very special emphasis.

I gave a number of definitions of holiness a number of times in the past in other messages. None of them was incorrect. I am sure that all of them were to some degree vague, and therefore to some degree inadequate. Holiness is a term that is very difficult to define, because it is so broad in usage, and there is nothing we can see to compare it to.

We have the words that are in the book and we have our imagination that we can meditate upon. But, they are not limitless, like God is limitless. Holy or holiness does indicate "cut out." It can also indicate "a cut above," indicating "better than." It can mean "set apart" or "separated for Godly use." However, it is still much more than that.

It is more than being morally righteous. It certainly includes that. Holy, as used to designate a person or thing, is very easily abused and misused. We are going to go back to the New Testament. We are going to pick up a little sliver of something here:

I Corinthians 3:17 If anyone defiles the temple of God, God will destroy him. For the temple of God is holy, which temple you are.

Now we are going from here to Hebrews 3. We will pick up just one verse, a very simple statement:

Hebrews 3:1 Therefore, holy brethren [the author here is addressing you and me], partakers of the heavenly calling, consider the Apostle and High Priest of our confession, Christ Jesus.

Now in both of those references, I Corinthians 3:17 and also this one in Hebrews 3:1 (and it is not limited to this, by the way), we are clearly designated as holy. We must be cautious because holy can be applied to us simply by virtue of our calling. In such a case, it indicates position or a state rather than the quality of our being in the image of God. In other words, in a sense there is no quality associated with it at all.

For example, people commonly term certain subjects or objects as holy, such as holy water. Dip the little jar in the Jordan River, come home with it, put a cap on it, and people can call it holy water. Or in Catholic churches they have holy water. It is plain old tap water, in many cases, but it is sitting in a place and its use is for holy uses. So it is called holy water.

There are holy places, like a cathedral or a person who may appear to be quite devout. But, we can take a knock at that one, because temple prostitutes were anciently designated as holy woman. Was there any kind of purity there? Of course not.

So just because something is designated as holy, in one sense it does not mean very much. Those designations simply mean something set apart for a religious purpose. This is without a doubt the lowest level of usage for the term holy.

What about a holy man? In the Christian religions, this usually equates with a person being considered a saint. Now does this include an Indian performing his tricks in a market place or alongside the street? You have seen pictures of them. Maybe you have actually seen them. What

about the Dalai Lama, who is considered by millions as a holy man? Are these people truly holy as God is holy, and as God expects us to be, because He is holy?

I think we can begin to see that holiness as God means it includes something more than merely being designated as set apart. It identifies a quality or a set of qualities in one's whole being that is God-like. It can only be truly found in one who has the spirit of God. That is absolutely essential.

We are going to go back to the Old Testament again to Exodus 3:2-6.

Exodus 3:2-6 And the angel of the LORD appeared to him in a flame of fire out from the midst of a bush. So he looked, and behold, the bush was burning with fire, but the bush was not consumed. [We all recognize this.] Then Moses said, "I will now turn aside and see this great sight, why the bush does not burn. So when the Lord saw that he turned aside to look, God called to him from the midst of the bush and said, "Moses, Moses!" And he said, "Here I am." Then He said, "Do not draw near this place. Take your sandals off your feet, for the place where you stand is holy ground." Moreover He said, "I am the God of your father—the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob." And Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to look upon God.

Once he knew for sure who that was, the feelings of filth began to arise within him. I might say, a strength sapping filth.

We are going to go to Joshua 5 to a somewhat similar event, only there was no burning bush.

Joshua 5:13-15 And it came to pass, when Joshua was by Jericho, that he lifted his eyes and looked, and behold, a Man stood opposite him with His sword drawn in His hand. And Joshua went to Him and said to Him, "Are you for us or for our adversaries?" So he said, "No, but as Commander of the army of the Lord I have now come." And Joshua fell on his face to the earth and worshiped, and said to Him, "What does my Lord say to His servant?" Then the Commander of the Lord's army said to Joshua, "Take your sandal off your foot, for the place where you stand is holy." And Joshua did so.

Now we are going to go from here to Isaiah 6.

Isaiah 6:1-5 In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lifted up, and the train of His robe filled the temple. Above it stood seraphim; each one had six wings: with two he covered his face, with two he covered his feet, and with two he flew. And one cried to another and said: "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of His glory!" And the posts of the door were shaken by the voice of him who cried out, and the house was filled smoke. So I said [Isaiah said this]: "Woe is me, for I am undone! Because I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, The Lord of hosts."

There is a commonality in each example. As the Bible uses the term holy it describes the very essence of God's being. It is an awe-producing power that emanates from Him, causing very powerful people to act in a humble fashion before Him: face to the ground; nose in the dust; flat on the belly; wondering, probably, when they were going to get struck dead and burned to a crisp. Also, in each case, they began to feel very dirty—that they should not be there, humbled.

We are going to go back. We will come back to Exodus, but first we will go to Matthew 17, verses 1 through—well, I have 1 through 16—but I do not know whether I need to go through all of them. But we will start there.

Matthew 17:1-7 Now after six days Jesus took Peter, James, and John his brother, led them up on a high mountain by themselves; and He was transfigured before them. His face shone like the sun, and His clothes became as white as the light. And behold, Moses and Elijah appeared to them, talking with Him. Then Peter answered and said to Jesus, "Lord, it is good for us to be here, if You wish, let us make here three tabernacles: one for You, one for Moses, and one for Elijah." While he was still speaking, behold, a bright cloud overshadowed them; and suddenly a voice came out of the cloud, saying "This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased. Hear Him!" And when the disciples heard it, they fell on their faces and were greatly afraid. But Jesus came and touched them and said, "Arise..."

Now we are going to go to Luke 5. Of course we are talking here about Jesus as a man. But, there was more than a man there. This is kind of an interesting one.

Luke 5:3-8 Then He got into one of the boats, which was Simon's, and asked him to put out a little from the land. And He sat down and taught the multitudes from the boat. When He had stopped speaking, He said to Simon, "Launch out into the deep and let down your nets for a catch." But Simon answered and said to Him, "Master, we have toiled all night and caught nothing; nevertheless at Your word I will let down the net." And when they had done this, they caught a great number of fish, and their net was breaking. So they signaled to their partners in the other boat to come and help them. And they came and filled both the boats, so that they began to sink. When Simon Peter saw it, he fell down at Jesus' knees saying, "Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord."

In this case, there was no glory of a transfiguration; there was a glorifying demonstration of power from Him. When Peter recognized—apparently maybe the way he said what he said to Jesus, "We have been fishing all night and caught nothing..."—showed his lack of faith, his doubt that Jesus could do what He told him He was going to do there. When Jesus did it, Peter's sin hit him in the mind like a ton of bricks, and the first thing Peter said was to admit his weakness, his sinful nature in what he had done.

This is a commonality: Every time God appears before someone in some kind of a situation like this, they are immediately struck by awe, either at what they see or what they hear. But, the experience makes them flatten out on the ground. Are you beginning to see what I am getting at?

They recognize a great difference between them and God, whether He looks like them or not. He is so far above them in purity and righteousness, and it shames them. They feel they have no right to be in the presence of this Being.

Exodus 34:28-35 So he was there with the Lord forty days and forty nights; [He neither ate bread, nor drank water.] he wrote on the tablets the words of the covenant, the Ten Commandments. Now it was so, when Moses came down from Mount Sinai (and the two tablets of the Testimony were in Moses' hand when he came down from the mountain), that Moses did not know that the skin on his face shone while he talked with Him. So when Aaron and all the children of Israel saw Moses, behold, the skin of his

face shone, and they were afraid to come near him. Then Moses called to them, and Aaron and all the rulers of the congregation returned to him; and Moses talked with them. Afterward all the children of Israel came near and he gave them as commandments all that the Lord had spoken with him on Mount Sinai. And when Moses had finished speaking with them, he put a veil on his face. But whenever Moses went in before the Lord to speak with Him, he would take the veil off until he came out; and he would come out and speak to the children of Israel whatever he had been commanded. And whenever the children of Israel saw the face of Moses, that the skin of Moses' face shone, then Moses would put the veil on his face again, until he went into speak with Him [God].

What we can learn from these incidents is that holiness is not merely morality, but a combination of consistent and powerful qualities that express a dazzling purity that tends to make men shrink, as if to hide from fear of exposure.

Besides God being a powerful creator, it appears to me that the term "being holy with an undefiled purity" encompasses within it the very qualities that separate God from mankind. And His separateness is so overwhelmingly apparent it creates awe.

Now there is something else there, that we will get back to in just a little bit, that is very encouraging. But, first I want us to go back to the book of Matthew. I think this is just so interesting.

Matthew 2:11-12 And when they had come into the house [these are the visitors from the east after Christ's birth], they saw the young Child with Mary His mother, and fell down and worshiped Him. [Here He was, just a baby!] And when they opened their treasures, they presented gifts to Him: gold, frankincense, and myrrh. Then, being divinely warned in a dream that they should not return to Herod, they departed for their own country another way.

This incident, where they fell down and worshiped Him, was at the beginning of Christ's life. Now, we are going to go to almost the end of Christ's life—in John 18. Was Jesus holy or what? Look at this:

John 18:6-8 Now when He said to them, "I am He," [These people were coming searching for Jesus and they could not identify him without the help of Judas] they drew back and fell to the ground. Then He asked them again, "Whom are you seeking?" And they said, "Jesus of Nazareth." Jesus answered, "I have told you that I am He. Therefore, if you seek Me, let these go their way."

These are two examples in which there was no dazzling transfiguration, one from very near the beginning of His life and the other very near its end. But I believe that God gives these examples of how Jesus' innate holiness definitely set Him apart from others. The disciples, even from time to time as we just saw, experienced things that blew the wind right out of them and knocked the pride out of them.

The very fact that God commands us to be holy shows that, to some degree, God's holiness can be attained over and above merely being declared holy as a result of our calling. God does not command us to seek after things that are either of no use or absolutely cannot be attained. Therefore some degree of holiness can be attained—a degree that God will be pleased that we have.

When this possibility of attainment is combined with what He showed us through Moses, in Exodus 34, it teaches us that some measure of this quality can be imparted to those who have an intimate relationship with God, as Moses surely did. His face was glowing because of being in the presence of God. That was not natural for Moses or any other man. God gave him that quality.

We of course know that it declined until it was gone. However, the lesson is there: holiness can be attained to, and those within a close relationship with God are going to receive help from Him, so that some of His holiness is transferred by His spirit to us.

Our face may never glow. But that will become part and parcel of our nature and of course the way we live. That is why I say it is encouraging to see that God is willing to give us that. And that has its basis in our relationship with Him.

So this attainment is achieved through actual life experiences within the relationship, as we strive to live in a manner of life as God lived when He was flesh and blood.

Being holy, brethren, is a formidable challenge, but we cannot escape it. It is commanded of us. As those five references given earlier show, becoming holy means consecration to work towards the highest standards we know. Those are the standards of God our Creator.

Let us keep adding to this. This is a vital subject. I personally have never gone into this subject like this before.

Let us go to II Corinthians 6. You are going to recognize this immediately. This fits right together with Ronny's sermonette ("Take My Yoke").

II Corinthians 6:14-16 Do not be unequally yoked together with unbelievers. For what fellowship has righteousness with lawlessness? And what communion has light with darkness? And what accord has Christ with Belial? Or what part has a believer with an unbeliever? And what agreement has the temple of God with idols? For you are the temple of the living God.

Now what do you associate priesthood with? Is it not the temple? I hope now you are beginning to associate it with Jesus Christ being the temple and with you being a part of the temple of God to such an extent, that you are personally a temple of God's spirit.

Listen:

II Corinthians 6:16-18 As God has said: "I will dwell in them and walk among them. I will be their God, and they shall be My people." Therefore, "Come out from among them and be separate, says the Lord. Do not touch what is unclean, and I will receive you. I will be a Father to you and you shall be My sons and daughters, says the Lord Almighty."

II Corinthians 7:1 Therefore, having these promises, beloved, let us cleanse ourselves from all filthiness of the flesh and spirit, perfecting holiness in the fear of God.

This means exercising self-control and self-denial. It may mean restraining ourselves from activities or things like foods, drink, or entertainments others apparently seemingly enjoy with no backlash. To be holy, one must truly walk the narrow way.

Here is a major reason why: a temple must be kept clean. We are part of a greater temple. It is not to be kept clean for its effect on others, but because God lives in it!

Are you aware that God gave instructions to the Israelite while they camped in the wilderness that they were to cover their excrement with dirt? Did you ever see the reason He gave for why? He said, "Because I walk in the camp of Israel" He did not want to step in it.

The temple has to be kept clean because God is there. Holiness is a tremendous challenge—attaining holiness. It is our challenge because God is there.

So separation from old friends and family may be painful, and they may resent it and turn against you. However, our loyalties must be to Christ—and everything including the use of our time. Thus it requires much study and prayer in order that our relationship with the source of holiness is intimate to the best of our ability, so that God is comfortable with projecting His holiness into us.

Do you think He is going to project it into somebody that is dirty with carnality; filthy from too close an association with this world; sharing its spiritual life with the spirit of the most filthy of all—Satan the devil? Not at all. Are you beginning to see why He demands of His children that we be holy? There is very good reason. What a challenge it is!

The apostle Paul calls for this: to present our bodies as living sacrifices—holy and acceptable to God. It is by these sacrifices that He means that our life is to be the vehicle for implementing the desires and purposes of the One who has made us a new creation in Christ Jesus.

That will not be accomplished—I mean the finishing of that creation—unless we give our lives to Him in living the way that He wants us to live.

Let us go on to Hebrews 12 where Paul or whoever the author is says:

Hebrews 12:14 Pursue peace with all people, and holiness, without which no one will see the Lord.

Just being called and designated as holy as a condition of our calling is apparently not enough. We have to grow in holiness.

I Thessalonians 3:7-13 ...therefore, brethren, in all our affliction and distress we were comforted concerning you by your faith. For now we live, if you stand fast in the Lord. For what thanks can we render to God for you, for all the joy with which we rejoice for your sake before our God, night and day praying exceedingly that we may see your face and perfect what is lacking in your faith? Now may our God and Father Himself, and our Lord Jesus Christ, direct our way to you. And may the Lord make you increase and abound in love to one another and to all, just as we do to you, so that He may establish your hearts blameless in holiness before our God and Father at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ with all of His saints.

There are two things that are essential for us to understand. There is a direct connection between love and holiness. God is love. God is holy. He is the epitomization of holiness, and it is those who really love Him and love the brethren who are going to be the ones most likely to grow in holiness, because of the way they conduct their lives and the attitude within them.

But he goes on to say in his prayer for them that they, through the inner strength of spiritual love, become blameless in holiness with God's help.

One of the reasons why I feel that these couple of verses here are especially essential to understand is because, in the very next chapter, he talks about the resurrection. He just went from this subject right on to the resurrection.

If there is ever a group of people who are God's children, who are looking forward to a resurrection that may be very close—this is how we can ensure that God will make a judgment of us in our favor, and we will be in that resurrection.

A brief description of holiness might be "living up to God's ideals in attitude and obedience." Now, these verses tell me that God's judgment regarding holiness is going to have much to do with whether we will be in that resurrection.

Let us continue this. We are going to go back into the Old Testament again.

Psalm 29:2 Give unto the Lord the glory due to His name; worship the Lord in the beauty of holiness.

This reference to the beauty of holiness is actually reflecting upon the attire of the priest when they served in the tabernacle and the temple. You can go to a verse here and there where it will say that the priest—when they performed their activities—were attired in gloriously white robes.

Back to the New Testament. We are in that part of the sermon where I am trying to emphasize how we become holy. We saw that God is willing to share His holiness with those who are in an intimate relationship with Him. It is going to take a great deal of spiritual effort and time—spending time with Him, growing in love, especially—to help persuade him (if I can put it that way) to do this for us. Now in Revelation—a very familiar chapter and verses. Remember we are talking about the beauty of holiness.

Revelation 19:7-8 Let us be glad and rejoice and give Him glory, for the marriage of the Lamb has come, and His wife has made herself ready. And to her it was granted to be arrayed in fine linen, clean and bright [here, again, is a parallel of reflection on the glorious robes of the priests as they performed their responsibilities at the tabernacle and the temple, and we are to worship God in the beauty of holiness], for the fine linen is the righteous acts of the saints.

Now if we reflect back on Psalm 29 and the beauty of holiness, what it is saying is that we are to go into God's presence and praise Him, having accomplished obedience to Him in doing the righteous acts that He requires of us to do. So we go before Him spiritually clothed in white robes.

There are going to be times when we go before Him filthy dirty because of sin. That has to be done from time to time because we do sin. We want to worship Him the way the psalmist said: in the beauty of holiness, that is, with a background of doing the righteous acts of the saints.

And it I can put it that way, that is going to stand us in good stead when it comes time for the resurrection.

Now we are going to go to Colossians 2. This is rather encouraging. The Colossian church was one that was being bombarded with all kinds of highfalluting philosophies that people were bringing into the congregation, things that came from the world. And I am going to read what Paul wrote to these people as a background. It is important for you and me to know.

Colossians 2:6-7 As you therefore have received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in Him [conduct your life according to what He says], rooted and built up in Him and established in the faith, as you have been taught, abounding in it with thanksgiving.

Now we add another factor that is important to put to use. It has a direct connection to holiness—attaining the holiness of God; the holiness God is willing to share with us.

We have to go before Him with the potential before us of what He has called us to: to be in His family, to the possibility to attain to the resurrection of the dead, to be completely and totally within His Kingdom, and living everlastingly in His presence and in the presence of Jesus Christ, working with them.

None of this potential, which is opening up before us, is possible without God's grace. Now please do not forget this. His grace in doing what He has already done in establishing us in Christ: it was He who called, He who granted repentance, He who gave us faith to do those things, He who prepared us for baptism, He who gave us His spirit.

Every one of these things is a gift from God. He did not have to do it. He did it simply because He elected to do so and because He loves us. All of these things are expressions of His grace.

So, when we get down on our knees to pray to God (what Paul is writing here), we never ought to forget what He has already done for us and is opening up to us for the future. If that does not call out of us expressions of thanksgiving (in fact, Paul says we should be overflowing with thanksgiving to God) for what has already given and promised that He will do, then why are we even praying?

Mr. Armstrong felt (I heard him say this) that the sin committed most often by the people of God is ingratitude. We just do not express our thanks to God, because we are not thinking about what He is doing and has done for us and our loved ones.

There are good reasons for God wanting us to thank Him. He does not get a big head. He wants us to thank Him because it is good for us. It is (what Paul is saying here) that thanks come out in copious amounts because we are thinking about what we have been given often. We must steadfastly continue in this responsibility.

Thanksgiving is given enough emphasis in the Bible that it seems God is telling us that it is an unfailing mark of a healthy spiritual life. We are not thinking about ourselves, we are thinking about Him. The self-centeredness begins to dissipate, because thanks puts us into a position of humility before the One who gave us what we are thanking Him for. It is those that God is going to respond to.

It is also interesting, when we evaluate what Paul says in those verses that we just read in Colossians 2, that those who are in this mindset are going to be the ones who are going to be able to resist the temptations of false doctrines because they are sufficiently grateful. It is not these people who will stumble.

So thanksgiving speaks of the goodness of God. It claims nothing. It sees no merit in our receiving but God giving and marvels at God's mercy. Thanksgiving is an expression of dependence and no longer boasts in self sufficiency. It is these people that Paul is telling us that God looks upon in favor.

Now why is there so much emphasis on holiness especially directed toward the priesthood? It is because they, through their instruction and living example, combined with the tabernacle, the temple, and all of the services conducted there; including the Levites functioning in their responsibilities in caring for the tabernacle/temple, and all of their accoutrements are called upon by God to be constant reminders to the entire nation and/or church that everybody is to be holy as God is holy.

People very quickly forget what we are to achieve, what we are to strive for. We might think, "Well God wants me to not sin." It is more than that, brethren. God wants us to be holy. That is far bigger and more important than just overcoming a single sin.

God is holy and we have to become holy.

Not committing sin and being righteous is a big step towards that. But, it is more than that. It involves the entirety of the relationship with God. It involves much time in study, much time in prayer, occasional fasting. It involves service to God and the brethren.

I think from what I have seen, it really especially involves prayer, especially prayer with a great deal of thanksgiving within it.

So why are the priests and Levites emphasized? It is because they are the visible and audible link between the beginning of God's call to be holy and the fulfillment of that purpose in the Kingdom of God. They occupy a very important position.

If you are following this, you understand that in the Old Testament the priesthood did not occupy exactly the same position as the ministry does today. The ministry is called to the same thing that you are. It is no different. God gives the ministry to be able to minister before Him. So my attitudes and my example are very important in that regard. But, brethren, the part that we have to really get through us is that God has called every one of us to be a priest.

You may not be working or operating within the same function of the body right now, but eventually you are going to be in a position where the priests were in God's Kingdom. So we are being put through the paces to be able to prepare us for that.

What I have given to you today is actually a digression from what I originally started out with, but this digression on holiness is so important because those who are called to serve God are in such an intimate association with God.