

HOLINESS**2 CORINTHIANS 6:11 – 7:4**

Why is being holy important? Imagine this scene. A farmer goes to the weekly Farmers' Market to sell the cottage cheese and apple butter made on his farm. He carries these in two large tubs. He then ladles the cottage cheese or apple butter into smaller containers for his customers. One day he gets to the market and discovers he's forgotten one of his ladles. He feels he has no choice but to use the same ladle for both products. But before long he can't tell which was which. That's what happens when we try to share or live out the good news of Jesus using hearts, minds, and tongues still fully immersed in a godless world. Nobody can tell who we are or to whom we belong.

Today I want you to think with me about holiness because it's an integral part of being cruciform. Cruciform means anything made into the shape of the cross. Your life is cruciform – cross-shaped - when it reminds other people of Jesus. Our actions, our attitudes, our character, how we live out our lives, and how we treat other people can resemble or reflect Jesus. Being cruciform is our mega theme as we make our way through 2 Corinthians – this letter the great Christian leader, Paul, wrote to new Christians living in Corinth. That word “holiness” can mean different things to different people. For most non-Christians, it has a negative connotation. They're likely to describe someone as being “holier-than-thou” - a person who is intolerant and judgmental of others. And even for followers of Jesus, it's not a word we often use outside of this building. In here, we sing about God being holy. We've heard we're supposed to be or become holy. But what does that mean – to be holy?

Some of us grew up associating holiness with not engaging in certain activities that got defined as being “worldly.” For example, when I was growing up, holiness was defined as not smoking, not drinking, not using curse words, not going to movies, not playing with cards because of their association with gambling, and not even going to the beach with members of the opposite sex because seeing each other in swimsuits could lead to impure thoughts. Holiness was defined in terms of limitations and negatives. Was that all wrong? Oh, no. But it wasn't all right either. It also tended to leave out a lot of stuff I believe is much more harmful spiritually. Like being a racist. Like loving money and things more than God. Like despising the poor. As with many things about our new life in Jesus, we have to come back to what the Bible teaches. The church I grew up in and its culture is not the final authority. What Pastor So-and-so or Mrs. Such-and-Such, the Sunday School teacher, taught is not the final authority. Scripture is our final authority. So, the question we want to try and answer today is this one, “What does it mean to be holy?” I believe our text today helps us understand it better. What can we learn from that passage about being holy? First,...

ACCEPT A NEW AND CLEAR IDENTITY.

Holiness is about accepting the fact you're a brand new person because of Jesus. That new identity should be clear to you and others. In our passage, Paul made it clear there must be some very clear distinctions between believers in Jesus and non-believers. You should be able to tell the apple sauce from the cottage cheese! Then, he asked

five rhetorical questions that all required a negative answer. “Don’t team up with those who are unbelievers. How can righteousness be a partner with wickedness? (It can’t.) How can light live with darkness? (It can’t) What harmony can there be between Christ and the devil? (There can’t be any.) How can a believer be a partner with an unbeliever? (You can’t be.) And what union can there be between God’s temple and idols? (There can’t be.) For we are the temple of the living God.” (2 Cor. 6:14-16 NLT)

Those five rhetorical questions provide insights into our new identity as followers of Jesus. We have been declared righteous before God because we are now in Jesus. Our sin has been credited to Jesus and His righteousness has been credited to us. We have moved from the realm of spiritual darkness into spiritual light. It was Jesus who said, “I am the light of the world. If you follow me, you won’t have to walk in darkness, because you will have the light that leads to life.” (Jo. 8:12 NLT) We now know and live in the Messiah – the Christ – the One God sent into the world to tear us away from Satan’s kingdom. We are the ones who trust completely in who Jesus is and what He has done for us unlike those who reject Him. As individual believers and as a group we are the new temple of God – the place where God dwells now spiritually.

What does it mean to be holy? If we had the time to look at many Scriptures, here’s what we would discover. First, holiness means I belong completely to God and live to please and serve Him more and more because of what Jesus has done for us. Second, holiness is both an accomplished fact and an unfinished process. You were made holy – set apart for God by God - when you put your faith in Jesus. “But you were cleansed; you were made holy; you were made right with God by calling on the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God.” (1 Cor. 6:11 NLT) But look again at a verse in the passage we read today. “Because we have these promises, dear friends, let us cleanse ourselves from everything that can defile our body or spirit. And let us work toward complete holiness because we fear God.” (2 Cor. 7:1 NLT) There’s the clear assumption this is a process that continues our entire lives.

Third, holiness is about the gradual, but complete transformation of our lives. “Let us cleanse ourselves from everything that can defile our body or spirit. And let us work toward complete holiness.” (2 Cor. 7:1 NLT) That phrase “body and spirit” means the totality of your being. Everything that impacts your life. Nothing is exempt. Nothing is overlooked. Nothing is off limits to the Holy Spirit. Fourth, I must cooperate with the Holy Spirit to become holy. You can’t become holy or get holier without God the Holy Spirit working in you. But He won’t just do it for you either. The Bible says, “Work hard to show the results of your salvation, obeying God with deep reverence and fear. For God is working in you, giving you the desire and the power to do what pleases him.” (Ph. 2:12-13 NLT) You have a new, clear identity in Jesus. Accept it. Live into it. Grow in your understanding of what holiness means and doesn’t mean. Here’s an example of what it means to grow in our understanding of holiness.

DON’T BECOME ISOLATED FROM NON-CHRISTIANS.

This was a very real area of tension for Paul and those Corinthian Christians in the first century. The same tension exists today. On the one hand, non-Christians can pull us away from Jesus by pulling us into activities and attitudes that don't please or honor the Lord. On the other hand, it's through healthy relationships with followers of Jesus that most non-Christians get attracted to Jesus in the first place and eventually become His followers. How are we supposed to be in the world, but not be of the world? How can we have authentic friendships with non-Christians but still keep some appropriate boundaries intact so that our witness to them is never jeopardized and our allegiance to Jesus is never questioned? Good, necessary, but hard to answer questions!

Christians often go to one extreme or the other. On the one hand, we can assume if we just stay away from non-Christians as much as possible, it will be easier to become holy. That will be a very disillusioning decision. Why? Because we all learn soon enough that sinfulness and worldliness isn't just "out there." It's just as much "in here" – right inside each of us. In addition, how can we ever share Jesus with a lost person if our goal is to avoid them at all costs? On the other hand, we can throw caution to the winds and try to minimize and even erase any distinctions between ourselves and those who don't follow Jesus. We can point to Jesus who was criticized for having meals with sinful people as justification. This was the tendency of too many Corinthian Christians so much so that it became hard to distinguish who was a follower of Jesus and who wasn't. There didn't seem to be any real difference between them and their unsaved neighbors. Maybe it got justified in a misguided effort to be evangelistic or to demonstrate their "freedom" in Christ, but clearly the lost were having a far bigger influence and impact on some of the saved rather than the other way around. There was still far too much of Corinth in those Corinthian Christians!

Let's try to understand what the Bible says here. The translation I read earlier put it like this, "Or what does a believer have in common with an unbeliever?" (2 Cor 6:15 NIV) In fairness, you could say we have a lot in common! God loves both the believer and the unbeliever. Jesus died and rose again for both believer and unbeliever. Both experience many of the same troubles and problems in life. I like better how this other translation renders that same verse. "How can a believer be a partner with an unbeliever?" (2 Cor. 6:15 NLT) That captures what Paul was getting at much better. There are some alliances, some partnerships in life, some kinds of relationships Christians and non-Christians should not get into together. Marriage might be the most obvious and important example. Don't ever marry an unbeliever. I'd be very careful about getting into certain business relationships or partnerships with a non-believer. The simple fact is we ultimately serve two different kingdoms. Why put yourself into a situation where your loyalty to King Jesus can ever be compromised or questioned?

By the same token, the Bible never says we should shun or withdraw from non-believers altogether. The Corinthians were absolutely surrounded by pagan values and practices. When Paul urged the Corinthians to avoid ungodly people, he gave this important insight, "But I wasn't talking about unbelievers who indulge in sexual sin, or are greedy, or cheat people, or worship idols. You would have to leave this world to avoid people like that." (1 Cor. 5:10 NLT) Just like Jesus, Paul was all about taking the

initiative, developing relationships with, and reaching out to lost people. In fact, that was what he lived for! But that never meant then – and can't mean now – joining in activities that bring discredit to Jesus or forming deep alliances with those who deny Jesus. Who is influencing who? Who is impacting who? Jesus always made sure He was the primary influencer and “impacter” when He was interacting with lost people. You and I need to learn how to get this right so we can be and stay holy. As we navigate our way through living a holy and cruciform life in a world that largely rejects Jesus and among lost people who largely reject Jesus, we will always need to...

BE WISE AND PRAYERFUL.

Here's a question we need to ask ourselves today. Does my culture or Scripture determine how I live my life before God? That's a harder question to answer than you might think. The Corinthians struggled with that question. They were relatively new Christians. When Paul wrote this letter, the first people he evangelized in Corinth had been followers of Jesus for only about five years. They were sincere believers, and the Holy Spirit was definitely working in them as individuals and as a group. But they had come out of pagan, immoral, idol-worshipping backgrounds. They were having a hard time letting their old lives go and living into their new lives in Jesus. Paul had just reminded them in the previous chapter, “Anyone who belongs to Christ has become a new person. The old life is gone; a new life has begun!” (2 Cor. 5:17 NLT) But what did that mean? What did that look like in their everyday, walk around lives?

In both of his letters to the Corinthians, Paul addressed some specific sinful behaviors that seem pretty obvious to us. For example, Paul said, no, you can't continue to visit prostitutes to get your sexual needs met. Seems like kind of a “no-brainer” to us, right? But Corinthian culture didn't associate sexuality with morality. It was kind of like us getting a snack when we're hungry. If we're feeling a little hungry, we hit the fast food drive through. No big deal. Corinthian culture said if you had a sexual urge, satisfy it with whoever you wanted. I can imagine Paul, head in hands, saying, “No, no, no! You can't just sleep with whoever you want. You are a temple of the Holy Spirit now. You are set apart by God for God. You're holy now.” Scripture must always trump culture.

Another example was this whole business of attending feasts at the temples of pagan gods. Those Corinthian Christians had a background in idol worship. Corinthian culture assumed no god demanded exclusive worship from its devotees; therefore, the more gods the better! In addition, attending these feasts was an integral part of the social and business fabric of Corinth. What if your pagan boss invited you to the temple of his god to enjoy some feast? What if you said no, he got offended, and fired you? Or what if your unbelieving mother-in-law invited you to the temple of her god for some kind of family celebration? What if you said no, she got offended, and family strife ensued? But Paul quoted several OT passages in what we read today to support his conclusion, “No, don't do it. That's a form of idolatry.” Scripture must always trump culture.

Well, here's another question we need to answer. Even if Scripture - not my culture - is my final authority, how can I apply it faithfully to my life today? After all, the Bible was

written thousands of years ago to different people in very different situations. Is it really possible to apply anything from Scripture to the way I live my life today? Absolutely! Paul's letters provide some insight. First, where Scripture is clear and specific, I need to obey. When it comes to living a holy life before God, some things are very easy. God has made some things crystal clear. "Those who indulge in sexual sin, or who worship idols, or commit adultery, or are male prostitutes, or practice homosexuality, or are thieves, or greedy people, or drunkards, or are abusive, or cheat people—none of these will inherit the Kingdom of God." (1 Cor. 6:9-10 NLT) There are some activities and attitudes that are inconsistent with a holy life before God past, present, or future. We don't need wisdom in that case; we just need to do what God says.

Here's the question again. Even if Scripture - not my culture - is my final authority, how can I faithfully apply it to my life today? Where Scripture is not clear and specific, I need to "do my theology." What does that mean? I look for Scriptural examples and principles that can guide my decision. I make it a matter of prayer. I seek out godly people and get their insight and opinions. I allow the Holy Spirit to speak to my heart. Paul did exactly that in his interaction with the Corinthians. I mentioned earlier that a Christian marrying a non-Christian is one example of the kind of partnership between believer and unbeliever God does not want. In Paul's first letter to the Corinthians, he wrote, "A wife is bound to her husband as long as he lives. If her husband dies, she is free to marry anyone she wishes, but only if he loves the Lord." (1 Cor. 7:39 NLT) I believe that insight is just as valid today as it was in the first century.

But what about if someone became a Christian after their marriage and their spouse did not? Was that a reason to end the marriage? No. God's expectation of what it meant to be holy was different. Paul wrote, "If a fellow believer has a wife who is not a believer and she is willing to continue living with him, he must not leave her. And if a believing woman has a husband who is not a believer and he is willing to continue living with her, she must not leave him." (1 Cor. 7:12-13 NLT) That's an example of holy wisdom that still applies today. Holy wisdom means you don't marry an unbeliever, but it also means you don't end an existing marriage just because one spouse is an unbeliever.

Here's another example of "doing your theology." Through Paul, God said eating food at a pagan temple meant entering into a worship experience that honored a false god. It was idolatry. "Am I saying that food offered to idols has some significance, or that idols are real gods? No, not at all. I am saying that these sacrifices are offered to demons, not to God. And I don't want you to participate with demons." (1 Cor. 10:19-20 NLT) But what if a non-Christian there in Corinth invited a follower of Jesus over for dinner at his home? What if that food had also been dedicated to a false god? Was that idolatry, too? No. "If someone who isn't a believer asks you home for dinner, accept the invitation if you want to. Eat whatever is offered to you without raising questions of conscience." (1 Cor. 10:27 NLT) Is there any way to apply that bit of holy wisdom to our lives some 20 centuries later? I think so. If I made a friend of someone who was a Muslim, a Hindu, or a Buddhist, I would gladly eat at his home and invite him to eat at mine. But I would not accept an invitation to worship with him at his mosque or temple.

Again, even if Scripture - not my culture - is my final authority, how can I apply it faithfully to my life today? Where Scripture is not clear and specific, I accept the fact gray areas will still exist. Not everything is black and white. People who love Jesus and God's Word as much as I do may end up acting or behaving differently than me. Let me throw out two examples. Over the last year, I've become keenly aware that not all Christians agree on whether they should get the COVID vaccine. Since Scripture does not answer that question clearly and specifically, I've had to "do my theology." I concluded I should absolutely get the vaccine. I did and I had my booster two weeks ago. I'm grateful to God for its provision. I see it as answer to prayer for God to end the pandemic. I see it as a way to love my neighbor. But obviously not all believers agree with me. In fact, some are now asking for religious exemptions from the vaccine. Since Scripture is not clear and specific, I have to accept it as a gray area. I must allow fellow believers "to do their theology" as I have done mine. We all need holy wisdom.

A second example. Our culture now insists that homosexual lifestyles and same-sex marriages should enjoy increased acceptance. In light of that, if you were invited to a same-sex wedding ceremony, would you attend it? Maybe you've already been invited. Did you attend it? Did you do your theology? Scripture makes it clear God loves gay people and that Jesus died for them just as much as He did for straight people. Scripture also makes it clear God's people do not persecute, oppress, or hate anyone for any reason. We're called to show everyone love, respect, and dignity. Scripture also makes it clear God created marriage as a relationship between one man and one woman. But Scripture never clearly and specifically addresses whether it's ever OK to attend a same-sex marriage ceremony. So, Rick, do your theology! I could not attend such a ceremony even if it meant risking my relationship with a gay friend. For me it means I'm giving my approval to a relationship God can ever please or honor.

But right there is where I need to let other Christians do their theology. And I need to be prepared for the possibility they might come to a different conclusion. They might not approve of such a marriage either. But perhaps they still believe they have valid reasons for attending such a wedding ceremony. They see it as an important and legitimate expression of their friendship with that gay person. They're concerned their non-attendance will cause unnecessary and serious offense. OK, I may not agree, but I also know not everything is black and white. There are some gray areas. But that should prompt us all the more to ask God to be and to stay holy. To obey when issues are clear. To do our theology when they're not. To seek wisdom, study Scripture, talk with other believers, and listen to the Holy Spirit. "Because we have these promises, dear friends, let us cleanse ourselves from everything that can defile our body or spirit. And let us work toward complete holiness because we fear God." (2 Cor. 7:1 NLT)

I read about a pastor who brought home a 12-year-old boy named Roger, whose parents had died from a drug overdose. There was no one to care for Roger, so he and his wife decided they'd just raise him as if he were one of their own sons. At first it was quite difficult for Roger to adjust to his new home. It was an environment free of heroin addicted adults! Every day, several times a day, Roger's new parents said to him, "No, no. That's not how we behave in this family.... No, no. You don't have to scream or

fight or hurt other people to get what you want.... No, no, Roger, we expect you to show respect in this family." And over time Roger began to change. Now, did Roger have to make all those changes in order to become a part of that new family? No. He was made a part of the family simply by the grace of his new father and mother. But did he then have to do a lot of hard work because he was in the family? You bet he did. It was tough for him to change, and he had to work at it. But he was motivated by gratitude for the incredible love he had received.

Are you cruciform? Do you have a cross-shaped life? We all have a lot of hard work to do now that God has adopted us into His forever family. Accepting a new and clear identity. Learning how to be in the world, but not of the world. Being wise and prayerful. But you don't do any of that in order to become a son or a daughter of our Heavenly Father. No, you make those changes because you are already His son or daughter. And every time you start to revert back to your old life - your unholy life - the Holy Spirit will say to you, "No, no. That's not how we act in this family." Holiness. It's essential to living a cruciform – a cross-shaped life.