

CHAPTER 1

WHAT HOLINESS IS . . . AND ISN'T

"Love takes the Harshness out of Holiness"
—Mildred Bangs Wynkoop, *Theology of Love*

Holiness is a buzz word in Christian circles these days. And it's not just one group or denomination that is focusing on this topic. Rather, there are numerous groups and denominations who have become infatuated with this crucial doctrine of the Christian faith. Unfortunately, while many of these groups are writing and talking about holiness, they present holiness in a way that is not compatible with traditional Christian teaching. For these groups, holiness is all about God and has nothing to do with us. In fact, they would argue, it is impossible for humans to be holy because holiness is the sole domain of God. But is that true? Can only God be holy?

It is certainly true that holiness comes out of God and is who God is—but it is equally true, according to Scripture, that you and I can also be holy because of God. Otherwise why would God command us, "I am the LORD your God; consecrate yourselves and be holy, because I am holy . . . I am the LORD, who brought you up out of Egypt to be your God; therefore be holy, because I am holy" (Leviticus 11:44-45)?

REDEFINING THE WORD

It may help to define what we mean by the word "holy." In the Introduction, we looked at several honest, but not very accurate, definitions of holiness. As part of my preparation to write this book, I asked several teenagers, youth pastors, and professors how they would define holiness. Here are just a few of the definitions these folks contributed to the discussion:

Holiness is . . .

- "to live like Christ—a life of self-sacrificing love."—Eric, a teenager
- "being baptized by the Holy Spirit, who then lives in our hearts."
—Jazmine, a teenager

- “living together with other Christians as we seek to live out what it means to be part of the kingdom of God on earth.”—Rudy, a teenager
- “to be set apart for God and His work, to be cleansed of all sin, to be perfect, and to avoid sin from here on out—but the most fundamental meaning is love.”—Tom, a professor
- “the reflection of God’s own character.”—Wes, a pastor
- “loving God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength and our neighbor as ourselves.”—Deirdre, a pastor
- “Holiness is the place where love and justice meet.”—Ruth Anne, a professor
- “giving control over every aspect of my life to God and letting Him be in charge. Some people call this ‘dying out to self’.”—Troy, a youth pastor

If nothing else, these definitions of holiness should serve to help us understand something very important—namely, that there are lots of different ways to talk about holiness! Each of the definitions above emphasizes an important aspect of what it means to be holy. The problem, from my perspective, is that far too often we focus on these various individual parts of holiness rather than seeking to explore the *whole* of holiness.

NARROWING IT DOWN

When I was growing up, I was often confused by all the different and segmented ways that people talked about holiness. It was not uncommon to hear my pastor talk about holiness using one set of words (such as “purity” and “sanctification”) while my parents used another set of words (e.g. “love” and “Christlikeness”) and to hear yet another set of words used at camp or when we had a revival (words like “eradication” and “dying out to self”). The problem, far too often, was that these women and men seemed to be offering me ideas that were similar at best and contradictory at worst in the way they described holiness to me. It seemed to me that everyone was talking about a different understanding of holiness. As a result, holiness seemed to me to be some unattainable goal. After all, if those who knew it best couldn’t agree on what it was, how could I possibly live it out?

Fortunately, I eventually came to understand that there weren’t really competing or even different definitions of holiness. Rather they were simply different slices of the same pie. In other words, each person who

talked about holiness talked about a *small segment* of it, rather than the *whole*. That's why it always seemed as if they were talking past each other.

It would be good to look at holiness as one whole idea. To do this means that we begin to look beyond our limited view of holiness and capture the bigger picture of what holiness is, what it does, and what it looks like in our lives.

In this book I will do my best to dispense with using ten-dollar words about which everyone has a differing opinion. Instead, we will focus on who Jesus is and what He desires for our lives, since Jesus is the center of what it means to be holy. Therefore, the working definition of holiness for this book is as follows: **Holiness is Christlikeness**. A plain and simple definition, and yet one which we will spend the rest of this book unpacking.³

IN THE BEGINNING

As we begin our study of what it means to be holy, perhaps we should start at the very beginning, Genesis 1—3. Go ahead and grab your Bible as we look at this together.

God had graciously given to Adam and Eve that which He had not given to any other creature that He created—the gift of being made in His image. Think about that for a moment. God, the awesome creator of the universe who is the epitome of what it means to be holy, created us in His image (Genesis 1:27). From the very beginning of time, God intended that we would be like Him.

Since God intends that we be like Him, He created us so that our hearts would naturally turn to Him. God's plan was that our worlds would revolve around Him and that everything we chose to do would be because of who He is and what He wants us to be. For Adam and Eve, this meant that they would care for the garden and rule over the other created beings as God's representatives (Genesis 1:28; 2:15-17).

But, as so often happens in great stories, there was a dramatic plot twist—free-will. When God created Adam and Eve, He instilled in them the ability to say “No,” to choose their own way rather than God's way. This was necessary to ensure that the love Adam and Eve had for God (and that we have for God) was genuine and not forced. God wanted to make sure that we were following Him because we wanted to, not because we had to. Otherwise, it wouldn't really be love.

Of course, granting free-will meant that when Adam and Eve were presented with an alternative to God's plan, they had the ability to choose

to do things their way rather than God's way. Enter the tree from which they were told not to eat. There was no reason given, just a stern warning accompanied by an even sterner punishment if they violated the command.

As temptations often do, the serpent comes into the story almost without our realizing it and immediately begins to cast doubt upon what God has said. Eve and the serpent begin to debate and interpret God's words. A discussion takes place about which fruit God was talking about, and whether they would really die if they ate it.

Go back and read Genesis 3:1-5, noticing Eve's language. Up until this point, the young woman has always been in conversation with God. However, now, for the first time in her young life, the woman is not talking to God but rather *about* God! No longer is God a person with whom she relates, the One with whom she has daily walks in the Garden. Instead, He is now an object she talks about indirectly. The very prohibition which once seemed a given is now scrutinized by Eve, as though it were not a given, but an option. God's rule is no longer a boundary to be observed but an obstacle to be avoided. She stands at the tree, gazes longingly at the fruit, and then reaches up, plucks some, and eats it. She then seeks out her husband, and he also eats from the tree.

As they eat, their eyes are opened. But instead of the terrific rush of wisdom coursing through their heads, a sense of shame fills them. Where before their nakedness had been something they mutually enjoyed, now it was something of which they were ashamed. No longer are they guiltless in their relation with one another or with God. So they cover themselves, and in the process, lose the intimacy they had once known. "Sin can be described as love gone astray or love that has been misdirected and distorted. It is a perversion of Christian love."⁴ This is the reality that Adam and Eve have discovered.

While they are wrestling with this new and terrible dilemma, they hear a sound that they have heard so many times before—God walking in the garden. That sound had always brought joy before, but this time it inexplicably brings feelings of panic and fright. They must hide! Quickly moving in among the bushes and shrubs, the man and the woman attempt to do what so many people since them have tried in vain—to hide from a seeking God. They realize that they are naked and defenseless. God now looks threatening. The question "Where are you?" (Genesis 3:9) is not heard as an inquiry but as an accusation. So they hide.

This rebellion of our first parents is alive and well today. Because of Adam and Eve's decision to disobey God, we all have within us a predisposition to want things our way, rather than God's way. This inclination toward self-sufficiency, more than any other thing, is what keeps us from being able to be holy. Instead, we find ourselves seeking to please ourselves, fulfilling our own wants and wishes rather than pleasing God and desiring what He desires. It's a classic battle of wills—our will versus God's will. And as long as we continue to allow our will to reign supreme, it is impossible for us to be holy people. As long as I claim control of any part of my life, then Adam's sin is still present. In fact, until I am willing to acknowledge God's claims upon my life and then unequivocally give Him all that I have, this sin of rebellion continues within me.

However, there is hope, as Adam and Eve discovered. God, as He does so often, continues to call out to them. The man and the woman soon realize that they will have to answer for their actions. They each admit their guilt but pass the blame for their actions to someone else—the woman, the serpent, even God himself.

God passes His judgment upon the man, woman, and serpent. Just as the man and the woman had perverted their relationship with God and each other, so their sentences make their lives perversions of God's original intention.

As they leave the garden, the man and woman are perplexed. Had not God said, "In the day that you eat of this fruit, you will die?" Why are they still alive? Their punishment seems so small and inconsequential compared to what God has promised. Then they begin to think back over the last several hours. There had been peace and harmony; now there was division and strife. Before, the land had been so easy to plant and cultivate; now there would be hard work. Before, the woman was told to populate the earth; now there would be great pain associated with birth. In the garden, they had enjoyed the presence of the Creator; now they were on their own. As they contemplate this, they step out of the garden for the first time. They look upon a barren landscape so different from what they had enjoyed. Suddenly, the truth hits them with the force of a hurricane. They are dead.

You see, they had been removed from the very presence of God. No longer could they enjoy their evening walks in the garden conversing with God. No longer would they be able to spend time in God's presence, learning what He wanted. No longer were these creatures, made in God's

image, reflecting what God desired. Instead, they were now following their own way of life, one which differed significantly from God's plan.

THE PROBLEM WITH BEING INDEPENDENT

I want to suggest that what is wrong in this world, wrong in our relationships with each other and with God, is the direct result of our insistence on denying our absolute dependence on God. Humans have always been restless and dissatisfied with what we have—as long as we are aware of something more, something we do not yet possess. And the ultimate possession would be to own ourselves—to be our own bosses, responsible to no one—to be god. (Notice the difference between being created in His image, being like Him—and replacing Him.)

We must understand that God's prohibition on the tree of the knowledge of good and evil was not meant to deprive the man and the woman of something positive. Instead it was to keep them from experiencing pain, hurt, disappointment, and betrayal. It was meant to keep from humanity what is possibly the greatest burden we have ever taken upon ourselves—that of being separate and independent from God.

Do we understand then what the man and the woman failed to realize until it was much too late? Our refusal to live in the context of a right relationship with God, choosing to follow our way instead of God's, is ultimately what makes us unholy. The man and the woman were created by God to live in proper relation to Him; as long as they did this, there was peace and harmony. They lived in community with God and each other. They were able to live out what it meant to be created in God's image because they had the ultimate example of that image to follow. But when they decided that they knew what was best and rejected God's rule, discord and strife entered their lives. No longer was there a sense of trust and love between God and humans, or even between humans and other humans.

RETURNING TO GOD-RULE

Even though we are the fallen children of Adam and Eve, we are still created in God's image. As such, we are called to establish a proper relationship with God. It is God, and God alone, who knows what is best for us. He is the source of life and the sustainer of life. We have to learn to trust His goodness and be willing to submit to His wisdom and ways. We have to be willing to turn from our self-rule and turn toward God-rule in

our lives. It is only when we allow God to guide us in our living that we can establish right relationships with those around us. In short, holiness is about our willingness to allow God to bring all parts of our life under the rule of His kingdom.⁵ Augustine, one of our early church fathers, describes the relationship this way: “Without God, we cannot; without us, God will not.” Holiness is a willing response to God. We accept God’s gracious invitation to repair that primary relationship with Him, and in so doing, we are restored to God’s original intent—that we become holy people created in God’s image to serve Him and the world around us.

A HOLY PEOPLE

Becoming holy people doesn’t happen overnight. It really does take a lifetime of practice. Think of it this way. Remember when you were first learning to ride a bike without training wheels? You didn’t just hop on and race down the street. First you had to learn to balance; then you had to have mom or dad hold on to the seat while you wobbled your way along. You may have run over dad’s toes a few times as he ran alongside helping you steer straight. You probably fell off a few times, got frustrated, and maybe even thought of giving up because it just wasn’t worth the effort. But eventually, several skinned knees, many apologies to your dad, and lots of practice later, you were able to ride down the sidewalk. You had mastered the two-wheel bike!

That’s the way it is with this journey called holiness. We begin to be holy people by joining ourselves to Jesus. Our initial steps in following Him become the first steps in a holy life.⁶ From that moment forward, we embark on this exciting journey called holiness, where God is already at work to make us holy people . . . if we will let Him.

However, none of us are good or talented or bright enough to do it well right away. It takes practice—a lifetime’s worth—to really master what it means to be holy. It often takes some skinned knees when we try to rush the process instead of waiting for God’s timing. And it can even mean that in our zeal to follow God we inadvertently run over a few toes, forgetting that others are on the same journey. But all along the way, we are learning what it means to be holy.

THE DISCIPLES’ ROAD

Consider the twelve disciples chosen by Jesus. These 12 men had the awesome privilege of spending 3 years with Jesus—eating with Him, trav-

eling with Him, listening to Him, praying with Him, sharing their deepest needs and dreams with Him. He called each one of them to come and follow Him, and when they did, they became different. The more time they spent with Jesus, the more they began to live in a different way. As they tried to emulate Him, they found themselves meeting with people they would have previously avoided—those who were sinners, demon possessed, and shunned by organized religion. They participated in miracles such as the feeding of the 5,000, witnessed people being cured from all sorts of diseases, and saw Lazarus raised from the dead.

What qualified them to do these things? Had they gone to the best Jewish college and majored in religion? Did they attend seminary and study theology? Were they trained by the best scholars and practitioners of ministry in their day? No. The disciples were at best just simple, common men. In fact, most of them were just fishermen—men of ordinary means. What made them different? One thing and one thing only—being with Jesus, the Holy One. When He was with them, and they with Him, they were holy. Jesus is what made them extraordinary.

And yet . . . one of those men, Judas, agreed to betray Jesus to the Roman soldiers for a handful of coins. Another, Peter, who had pledged his very life for Jesus, ended up denying that he even knew Jesus—three times. And Thomas, upon hearing that Jesus had been resurrected from the dead as He promised, refused to believe it without tangible evidence. And the other disciples? When Jesus was crucified they tucked their tails and ran away, hiding behind locked doors for fear that they would be the next ones arrested and killed.

So, were the disciples holy? Yes. Like us, God had already begun this work in their lives. But they recognized, as we must, that holiness does not occur all at once. It is a lifetime pursuit. One of the counterfeit ideas about holiness is that holiness is a static thing to have, something that we possess rather than a life we live. In other words, some people believe that God makes us completely holy at a certain moment and that's the end. We are now completely holy and never again have to worry about sin. However, examples from Scripture seem to indicate that this is not the case. God calls us to a life of holiness from the moment we ask Him to forgive us of our sins and agree to follow Him, but He spends *the rest of our lives* completing that process. It was true for the first disciples, and is true for us.

We begin to be holy people the moment we choose to follow Jesus.

Our initial steps in following Him become the first steps in a holy life. But we are not finished. Just like our bicycle experience, it takes practice before we are at a point where we don't have to worry constantly about falling prey to sinful temptations. And even when we get to the point where we are riding without the training wheels, we still have to be on constant guard for those potholes along the way which can trip us up. Once we begin walking with God, we have to stay "in step with the Spirit." (Galatians 5:25).

What enables us to not only survive the journey, but actually thrive and enjoy it, is the fact that we don't make the journey alone. Jesus, who has been with us from the very beginning, continues to walk beside us, helping us navigate this road called life. It is through His power, love, and guidance that we are enabled to continue to grow in holiness, becoming more and more like Him in our words, actions, and attitudes. We can see what holiness looks like and how holiness behaves by watching Jesus. And the more our focus is on Jesus, the less we will worry about doing things that aren't like Jesus. But the key is spending time with Him. We'll discuss this more in the following chapters.

Questions to Ponder

1. How would you have defined holiness prior to reading this chapter? How would you define it now?
2. Do you really believe that it is possible for humans to be holy? Do you believe that you can be holy? Why or why not?
3. What are some of the counterfeit ideas about holiness that you've heard?

Feelings to Process

1. When we hear the word "holiness," certain images come to mind. What are some of those images which have shaped the way you feel about holiness?
2. When you think of a holy God, how does that make you feel? Terrified? In awe? Confused? Ashamed? Part of the team?
3. How is your story like Adam and Eve's? How is it different?

Actions to Practice

1. Earlier in this chapter, you read this quote from Augustine: "Without God, we cannot; without us, God will not." Consider what your role is in this pursuit of holiness. Write a short prayer to God, let-

ting Him know that you're committed to this process of becoming a holy person.

2. Working through this book by yourself might be confusing. Find a trusted Christian with whom you can discuss the things you read, as you seek to become the person God created you to be.