

Sanctification

References:

G Bingham, *The Christian Doctrine of Holiness*.

Gordon Smith, *Called to be Saints: An Invitation to Christian Maturity* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2014)

Kelly M. Kopic (Ed.), *Sanctification, Exploration in Theology and Practice* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2014)

D Peterson, *Possessed by God*, (Apollos: IVP, 1995)

Reading: Lev. 11:44-45

⁴⁴For I am the Lord your God. Consecrate yourselves therefore, and be holy, for I am holy. You shall not defile yourselves with any swarming thing that crawls on the ground. ⁴⁵For I am the Lord who brought you up out of the land of Egypt to be your God. You shall therefore be holy, for I am holy.”

Introduction

Holiness or in theological language, sanctification, is a difficult topic to discuss. Part of the reason is that we have held on to a secular understanding of the term rather than what is given in the Word of God. This understanding of holiness pertains mainly to personal righteousness and purity. So, we strive to be holy. We make every effort to be holy. This is not totally wrong. However, this cannot be our starting point. We need to dispel this approach. The idea of the holy as given to us in the scriptures is quite different. This is also complicated by several centuries of theological formulations. We will refer to some of these later in the studies.

Another reason is that there is some confusion in theological circles regarding the use of the term sanctification. Some have used it to refer to our standing in Christ, i.e. when we come to Christ. This is referred to as ‘positional’ or ‘status’ sanctification. Others talk about a ‘progressive’ sanctification, i.e. growing in maturity. These are confusing terms. The doctrine of sanctification has been dealt with in many varied ways. We will need to look at the term as it is used in the Old and New Testaments, i.e. a word study. I will address these themes in these studies.

Holiness may not be a topic on every Christian’s tongue. Our God is a holy God. We are called to be holy and to live holy lives. What does this mean? Are they mere clichés bandied around in Christian circles? How do we understand the statements that we make regarding holiness? What about the commandments of God? Are they still necessary? And have they anything to do with holiness? What about sin? If we sin, are we still holy? If not, then what do we do about it? These are some of the questions we will be discussing in these studies.

There is still a nagging problem in popular teaching regarding holiness. Salvation is viewed as a confession of sin and acceptance of Christ. While we duly acknowledge justification by faith alone, after this one has to work towards maturity or holy living. As a result, there is an abundance of books on what one must do for spiritual formation. In other words, they address the ‘how’ of holiness. I do not think that is helpful. I feel that we need to revisit these themes and answer some of the questions above.

This series of studies

From this short introduction one can see that this is a complicated topic. It won’t be an easy task, but I will try. We will need to work through the themes slowly. The way I want to discuss the topic over these few weeks is like this.

1. What is holiness?
2. Holiness as union and communion.
3. Holiness by faith alone.
4. Holiness and the law (grace upon grace)
5. Holiness – God’s work or ours.

There are many other facets in dealing with this topic, but I will restrict myself to discuss the above only.

1. What is Holiness?

First of all, we need to define the term ‘holy’. What is it? It is thought of in many different ways by Christians. Largely it is in ethical terms, but what is ethical is variable in different cultures. Ethics has a hierarchy of principles which means that some principles can be superseded by what is considered a higher principle. If we want to go that way, then we need a foundation to base these principles on. It can be very complicated and I don’t intend to go there. Yet morality in holiness cannot be ignored and I will mention this briefly in the last study.

How do we understand holiness as it is given to us in the scripture? We need to blank off the secular understanding and the work-related holiness. For a start we need to have a basic understanding of holiness from the scripture.

For I am the Lord who brought you up out of the land of Egypt to be your God. You shall therefore be holy, for I am holy.” (Lev. 11:45)

This is the text that I will base our studies on because it sets out holiness on the basis of relationship. God is holy. Scripture abounds with numerous calls like this one in Leviticus calling us to be holy because our God is holy. We need to note that this is not simply a call or a command. It is a statement of our relationship with God. The call to be holy is made from a God who brought the Israelites from slavery out of Egypt to a land that was given to them. They are the people of God and as such they will be like their God who is holy. This is the relational understanding of holiness and my approach in this series of studies. Thus, for us to be holy, there need to be the proper relationship with the creator God. The studies on holiness must address this relationship.

Holiness is a property of God. What does it mean to be holy? Or what does it mean for God to be holy? This is usually answered from a moral standpoint. That is not wrong. Of course, God is morally perfect. However, how is this moral perfection derived. Ethicist often asks the question, is God morally perfect because He is God or is God morally perfect because He measures up to the standard of perfection? Who establishes this standard of perfection? This standard of perfection belongs to the human realm. What about the time before creation? How was the holiness of God expressed then?

Still others have talked of an imputed holiness. Yes, it is a property of God and it is relational. This property of holiness is imputed to us as a result of our relationship with God. Though this seems a reasonable way of thinking, yet the imputation cannot be thought of as something that has been given to us as if it becomes our property. Imputation without a sense of connectedness with the God who imputes this to us would be wrong. We cannot be holy unless we are connected to the holy God. We will see more of this later on.

Holiness is the presence of God

Our approach to the theme needs to be theological and not philosophical or ethical. We begin by looking at the story of Moses at the burning bush.

¹ Now Moses was keeping the flock of his father-in-law, Jethro, the priest of Midian, and he led his flock to the west side of the wilderness and came to Horeb, the mountain of God. ² And the angel of the Lord appeared to him in a flame of fire out of the midst of a bush. He looked, and behold, the bush was burning, yet it was not consumed. ³ And Moses said, "I will turn aside to see this great sight, why the bush is not burned." ⁴ When the Lord saw that he turned aside to see, God called to him out of the bush, "Moses, Moses!" And he said, "Here I am." ⁵ Then he said, "Do not come near; take your sandals off your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground." ⁶ And 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 at God. (Ex. 3:1-6)

This is the story that will anchor our thoughts on holiness. Our concern here is not why the bush was not consumed while burning. That aroused Moses' curiosity and ours too. However, that is not our concern, but why was the ground holy. There was no intrinsic holiness in the bush or in the area surrounding the bush. Prior to this incident, it was just any place. It can be seen that the place was holy because God was present. After the incident with Moses, the place would revert to be like any other place in the wilderness because God was no longer present there.

We need to see first of all that holiness is what God is. The psalmist says, "Exalt the Lord our God, and worship at his holy mountain; for the Lord our God is holy!" (Ps. 99:9). God is holy and wherever God is, that place is holy. The mountain where God is is the holy mountain. The mountain is the creation of God. There is no intrinsic holiness in the mountain. A little later, we will elaborate on what we mean when we say God is holy.

What is holiness?

It is not easy to capture the idea of holiness because there is nothing in the created order that we can call holy. As we have said, holiness is a property of God and it cannot be conferred to the created order. In that case in order to understand holiness we need to see God and this makes it a difficult thing. One way is to contrast holiness with sin. In other words, anything that is not of God is sin. We need to see the contrast between holiness and sin, and Isaiah put it very clearly in this passage. Holiness cannot co-exist alongside sin. The clean cannot put up with the unclean. The vision of Isaiah puts this very clearly and this passage is pivotal in the way we see holiness.

¹ In the year that King Uzziah died I saw the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up; and the train of his robe filled the temple. ² Above him stood the seraphim. Each had six wings: with two he covered his face, and with two he covered his feet, and with two he flew. ³ And one called to another and said:

"Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts;
the whole earth is full of his glory!"

⁴ And the foundations of the thresholds shook at the voice of him who called, and the house was filled with smoke. ⁵ And I said: "Woe is me! For I am lost; for 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!" ⁶ Then one of the seraphim flew to me, having in his hand a burning coal that he had taken with tongs from the altar. ⁷ And he touched my mouth and said: "Behold, this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away, and your sin atoned for." (Is. 6:1-7)

This is Isaiah's vision of the holiness of God. Isaiah prophesied during the dying years of the Southern Kingdom Judah. He could see that the errors of the state could not be corrected under the system of kingship that existed during his time. He could see that God will bring about a new government someday through a child whose name would be Immanuel, God with us. Though this vision was somewhat hazy, yet he saw very clearly the holiness of God. He caught a glimpse of God in His inner sanctum, 'sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up'. 'The train of his robe filled the temple' need not be taken literally as it speaks of the splendour of the majesty of God.

Above the throne stood the seraphim. They are angelic creatures praising God and serving as the messengers of God. Little is known about them, except that in the presence of the glory of God, they have to shield their faces from this glory. They also have to cover their feet which is a symbol of their creatureliness. This is a sign of their submission. That is why Moses had to take off his shoes because he was standing on holy ground. However, what is of importance here is the message brought forth by the seraphim.

“Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts;
the whole earth is full of his glory!”

This three-fold repetition of holy is significant. While we say that God is love, we do not say ‘love, love, love’. Holiness, as an attribute of God, is like none other. This is the very essence of God.

If we only get a glimpse of the holiness of God, the contrast with our sinful state becomes glaringly evident. This brought within Isaiah an acute sense of his sin, ‘Woe is me!’ he said. We don’t often use the word, woe, today. It is a word that is used to express deep sorrow or grief. Imagine, Isaiah, a prophet that was charged with speaking the word of God to His people, suddenly saw the holiness of God and contrasted with his own sinful state, how else could he sum up the huge gulf between a holy God and a sinner such as he, and so he said, ‘woe is me’, a profound sense of grief and sorrow. We need to have a sense of this today because we have been conditioned to see ourselves as ‘not too bad’ a bunch of people.

Isaiah went on to say, ‘for I am lost’, or as some other translations put it, ‘for I am ruined’. However, the KJV puts it more forcefully and appropriately, ‘for I am undone’. This complement what he said before, ‘Woe is me’. Putting it bluntly, Isaiah said, ‘I am finished’. There is nothing left in him anymore, nothing of his accomplishment or anything that he can put before a holy God. There is nothing left in Isaiah when he saw the holiness of God. Nothing that is in him counts while in the presence of God. Everything that he had built up in his career suddenly disintegrated before him. Whatever justification he had of himself fell apart. That is what ‘undone’ means. I wonder how many of us see holiness this way.

This sin or uncleanness needed to be dealt with and the problem is verbal, ‘I am a man of unclean lips’. This is so because it is what comes out from the mouth that defiles a person (Matt. 15:11). The things that we say reflect who we are. If we present a front for the world to see without the reality within, and we are pretty good in doing that nowadays, then God will judge that hypocrisy.

When we can see clearly where the filth is, it is not within our power to clean that out. It was not what Isaiah did or resolved to do that can achieve that. It was the action of God in taking away his sin, touching his mouth with burning coal. This is Isaiah’s imagery. The burning coal burns away the impurities in our lives. It speaks also of judgement. Finally, Isaiah put the result in the passive, ‘your sin (has been) atoned for’. Only then can we with clean lips ‘kiss the Son’ (Ps. 2:12).

Holiness is relational and communal

⁴⁵ For I am the LORD who brought you up out of the land of Egypt to be your God. You shall therefore be holy, for I am holy.” (Lev. 11:45)

⁶ “For you are a people holy to the LORD your God. The LORD your God has chosen you to be a people for his treasured possession, out of all the peoples who are on the face of the earth. (Deut. 7:6)

The people of Israel are called to be holy, a relational holiness. They are to be ‘a people holy to the Lord your God’. This is because God has chosen them to be His ‘treasured possession’. They are a people whom God has chosen to fulfil His purpose. God brought them out of slavery in Egypt and

established them in the Promised Land. From then on, God would work through them as a nation and step by step reveal His purpose for the fulfilment of salvation of His created people.

Israel was to be a ‘people holy to the Lord, your God’. This is a hint that holiness is communal. While we may talk of personal holiness, and of course it needs to start with us, there are many references like this to indicate that holiness is relational and communal. Paul in his letters to the churches often addressed the saints in that community. This communality of holiness will be addressed in the last session.

God is holy – holiness defined

What does it mean to say that God is holy? Commonly moral standards are mentioned. Yes, there is a moral standard given to us in the Ten Commandments. That is undeniable. However, the question we need to ask is whether moral standards define holiness? We will say more about that in a later study on holiness and the law.

What then defines holiness? We have said that holiness is relational. When we say that God is holy, that holiness is expressed in both the intra-trinitarian (Father, Son and Spirit) and extra-trinitarian (Triune God and His creation) relationships. Firstly, the intra-trinitarian relationship is the relationship of the triune God, Father, Son and Spirit. Perhaps it may be easier to conceive of that relationship before creation when only the triune God exists. Their holiness is expressed in the mutual love and giving to one another. Each person of the Godhead receives glory from the other through their mutual self-giving. That is holiness. At creation, the triune God formed a people for His possession who are for the praise of His glory. In love, the Father gives His Son a Spirit filled people who bear His name. The story of humanity as given to us in Scripture tells of the way the love of God is played out. Humanity is to live in relational obedience to the Father thus gives glory to Him. This did not happen. The holiness of God was then displayed in a series of events leading to the redemption of His creation. We call this salvation history. In this history, the holiness of God is revealed.

Along the way, the people were to live in the Sabbath of God, to keep it holy. The seventh day is the rest of God, the completion of creation. Holiness is to be found in living in God’s rest, i.e. trusting and obeying the creator God who has accomplished all things. In His providence, God called out a people, through Abraham and his family. This would work through to the rest of humanity. Through this family would come the incarnate Son of God, sinless humanity redeeming sinful humanity, renewing (re-creating) humanity. In the process, a sacrificial system was given as a foretaste of things to come. It was a system that defines holiness – forgiveness of sins and a restored relationship with God.

From this, we can see that the idea of the holy is to be separated to God. God called out a people for Himself and they are to be holy just as He is holy. Separation to God is fundamental in our understanding of holiness and it is the work of God. We cannot, and are unable to, separate ourselves to God. God has chosen us out to be His treasured possession.

⁵ Now therefore, if you will indeed obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession among all peoples, for all the earth is mine; ⁶ and you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.’ These are the words that you shall speak to the people of Israel.” (Ex. 19:5-6)

Sanctification – a word study. (definitive and progressive)

There is much debate in the literature whether sanctification is a definitive event, termed definitive sanctification or a progressive process throughout life (progressive sanctification). Much of the confusion is a matter of terminology. When the term sanctification is used in Scripture, it refers to a definitive event. Scripture does not use the term sanctification for the progressive process. However, we know that in life we go through a process of change as Paul mentioned that we are ‘being transformed

into the same image from one degree of glory to another' (2 Cor. 3:18). Some have labelled this 'the doctrine of sanctification'. We will talk about this at a later study. For the present we will do a word study to see that sanctification, as used in Scripture, is a definitive event. We need to see a series of verses where this term is used.

And by that will we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all. (Heb. 10:10)

And now I commend you to God and to the word of his grace, which is able to build you up and to give you the inheritance among all those who are sanctified. (Acts 20:32)

that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word,²⁷ so that he might present the church to himself in splendour, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish. (Eph. 5:26)

To be sanctified, i.e. to be made holy, is the work of God in the believer. It is the presence of God as we have said earlier as only God is holy. Sanctification happens when we are brought into the presence of God and because God is holy, we are then made holy, i.e. sanctified. It is an all or none phenomenon. Scripture does not talk about a holier state as we go along. It is not an event under our control as the sanctifier is God working through the Son and Spirit. We will see this in the following texts.

To the church of God that is in Corinth, to those sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints together with all those who in every place call upon the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, both their Lord and ours: (1 Cor. 1:2)

And because of him you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God, righteousness and sanctification and redemption, (1 Cor. 1:30)

And such were some of you. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God. (1 Cor. 6:11)

¹³For if the blood of goats and bulls, and the sprinkling of defiled persons with the ashes of a heifer, sanctify for the purification of the flesh, ¹⁴how much more will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without blemish to God, purify our conscience from dead works to serve the living God. (Heb. 9:13-14)

And by that will we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all. (Heb. 10:10)

For by a single offering he has perfected for all time those who are being sanctified. (Heb. 10:14)

We will be looking through some of these texts as we go along. Sanctification is by the work of Christ just as it is in justification which we will look at later. We also need to see that sanctification is by word and Spirit as the following passages tell us.

¹³But we ought always to give thanks to God for you, brothers beloved by the Lord, because God chose you as the firstfruits to be saved, through sanctification by the Spirit and belief in the truth. ¹⁴To this he called you through our gospel, so that you may obtain the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ. (2 Thess. 2:13-14)

²according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, in the sanctification of the Spirit, for obedience to Jesus Christ and for sprinkling with his blood: (1 Peter 1:2)

The Spirit brings to us the reality of what Christ has achieved. Peterson sums it up well.

...sanctification is the work of the Holy Spirit, creating faith in Christ through the preaching of the gospel. This work unites us to Christ, who is the source of our sanctification because of his redemptive work. (Peterson, p. 62)

God is holy and wherever He is, there is holiness. It is not transferred to another. It is relational, i.e. related to the persons of the Godhead. Sin mars this relationship. God's holiness is displayed in the way God relates with His creation in redemption. This is achieved through the Son and the Spirit. This union with the Godhead is the subject of our next study.