

## THE HOLY KISS AND ITS EXCEPTION

INTRO: I wonder, how many of you have heard a message on the 'holy' kiss mentioned numerous times in the NT? Let me begin this message by reading several passages of Scripture: Romans 16:16: Greet one another with a holy kiss. The churches of Christ greet you. 1 Corinthians 16:20: All the brethren greet you. Greet one another with a holy kiss. 2 Corinthians 13:12: Greet one another with a holy kiss. 1 Thessalonians 5:26: Greet all the brethren with a holy kiss.

Four times in four different passages we read Paul's command for Christians to greet one another with a holy kiss. I have pondered this command, among other difficult texts over the years and have come to a conclusion, as to what I think it means. So, in this message I want to give, what I think is the meaning of this imperative, and how it is to be practiced, and then I want to share certain times that are an exception to this command.

### I. THE MEANING OF THIS IMPERATIVE

We want to look first at the meaning of this phrase, 'the holy kiss'. In Bible interpretation there are seven very important keys to analyzing a passage of Scripture in order to come to the true meaning. One does not always use every one of these but one must always use at least one of these or any combination of these for good Bible interpretation. Every pastor should be familiar with these and know how to use at least the majority of them quite well. These seven principles are historical, cultural, grammatical, lexical, syntactical, theological, and contextual analysis.

Sometimes the meaning of a passage becomes difficult, but more often, it is not the meaning of a text but the application of it that is difficult. And sometimes, when we do not like the obvious application, we tamper with the meaning so that the application becomes unnecessary. It is very often important to discover first what any given text meant to the original hearers. Then proceed to the task of determining how it applies to us.

When we come to passages like were read earlier, interpretation is difficult. "Greet one another with a holy kiss." What did it mean to the original hearers? I believe to interpret this passage one must have an understanding of the historical situation. Adam Clarke in his commentary on Romans 16:16 says, "*Salute one another with a holy kiss. In those early times the kiss, as a token of peace, friendship, and brotherly love, was frequent among all people...*" The kiss as a greeting was as common in that day as the handshake is today. No one needed to be instructed to greet people with a kiss. That was the way of the day. That is the historical situation and also gives us the cultural setting in which it is found.

So, it is very important to note that in each of the passages I read, the instruction is not to greet one another with a kiss. There was no need for such instructions since that was what was done everywhere, believer and unbeliever. There are still cultures today where people greet each other with a kiss, and that by non-Christians. Dave Klassen, one of the Mennonites from Russia who had spent 10 years in Russian prisons said to me about the Russians, "Dee sen'n gonich maekjlich. Dee kussun eenum drekt up'um Muul." "They are not fussy. They will kiss you right on the mouth."

Today, we are in a culture where two men kissing one another seems anything but appropriate. One of my daughters saw several men of a denomination where the men kiss the men and the women the women, and when she saw two men kissing, she found it repulsive. That repulsion comes from our culture and what is happening today. In some cultures it would carry no connotations like it does here in Canada.

So, what does our text mean and how is it to be practiced? I want to give, what in my estimation, is the meaning of this imperative. It says, "Greet one another with a holy kiss." We noted earlier what it does not say. It does not say, "Greet one another with a kiss." I believe what Paul's intent was, was the addition of the word 'holy' to the already normal practice of greeting each other with a kiss. In other words, the stress is not the kiss. The stress is the 'holy'. I am firmly convinced that if Paul had

written this in our day, he would have said, "Greet one another with a holy handshake." It is the word 'holy' that makes this greeting different and important.

We now need to use the keys of lexical and theological analysis. What is significant about a holy kiss? What is holy? The basic idea of holiness is 'separateness'. For sinful man, the basic idea is separateness from sin. You see, when we got saved, Colossians 1:13 says God translated us from the power of darkness into the kingdom of His dear Son. Darkness is sin. So Scripture says, "Let everyone that names the name of Christ depart from iniquity" (2 Tim. 2:19). The Bible also instructs us to be holy even as God is holy. It says we are to pursue holiness, for without holiness no one will see the Lord.

Now, let me come to the big question. What is the difference between a 'holy' kiss and a regular kiss, or a holy handshake and a regular handshake? Well, there is a significant difference. Enough of a difference that Paul could instruct Christians to greet each other with a 'holy' kiss. So, let me ask you a question. Here comes a man to church and during the week he has done shady business deals, or he has been cursing and swearing and he has not made things right. Or maybe, in the car, just before he arrived at church with his family, he was very angry with his wife or his children, and then he steps into church and he has this big smile and a very 'happy' greeting. I ask you, is that a holy kiss or handshake, or hug? Of course not! That greeting is as regular as one ungodly communist greeting another in Russia. That is a greeting, but not a Christian greeting, or a holy greeting. So, a holy greeting says I stand right with God. To the best of my ability, I have taken care of everything I know of. I am a Christian and a clean Christian. That's what it means to greet one another with a 'holy' greeting!

Before we move on, let me add that there is a danger, in our culture, or maybe most cultures, when the greeting used is a kiss or a hug. Both open people up to temptation with the opposite gender. I observed in a certain church where the pastor hugged all the

women as well as the men, and I would NOT endorse such a practices. Some churches have overcome this difficulty by having men kissing men and women kissing women. There is some evidence that the early church laid aside this practice because of the danger of temptation.

## II. THE PRACTICE OF THIS IMPERATIVE

So, the Christian is to keep his life in order and he is to practice the holy greeting. But this practice went by the wayside in the early church. And then they began to practice it as a sort of special greeting during the church service. Then it degenerated to practicing the 'holy' kiss only at communion. From there, it degenerated to what we see in Old Colony or Sommerfelder, and some Bergthaler Mennonite churches where they give a brief nod to each other before they pass the cup of wine to the next person. And this is to add up to a holy kiss!

What Paul had in mind, as I see it, was not a special kiss at communion or he would have specified that. Nor did he have a holy nod in mind. What he had in mind was to make the common greeting holy, and that, by the life of the one who greeted another. So, in life, sin was to be held, not in short accounts; but current accounts. They were to greet one another, whenever they met, with a holy greeting. That is, they were not to be hypocrites when they greeted one another, professing to be holy, since that is what a saint is to be, but living a different life when away from the saints.

## III. THE EXCEPTION TO THIS IMPERATIVE

What we have been dealing with is the common greeting, and that it was to be holy, and that it was commanded. It would then be practiced whenever they met. But I believe there are exceptions to this general rule, and that there are times when it must be set aside. Let us look at several cases set out in Scripture.

A. Matthew 18:15-17 (Mention passage and read)

What we have here is the case of one brother sinning against another. These are two Christians. Sin against another must be handled differently in the church than in the world. If a non-believer wrongs us, we are instructed to suffer it patiently. When a believer sins against another it must not be suffered patiently, but it must be dealt with.

The process here is very simply a three step process. The long and short of it is this: If ultimately this person does not deal with his sin, he is to be excommunicated. That is what is meant by the words in verse 17, "...if he refuses even to hear the church, let him be to you like a heathen and a tax collector." In recent years people have interpreted that to mean that you treat him like an unbeliever in that you set about to win him back. I can tell you one thing very clearly, the Jews did not treat the heathen and tax collectors as someone they were trying to win back. They avoided them like the plague. This is simply the doctrine of shunning, which has fallen into great disrepute in the church. I can also tell you that the modern view of this verse has not been held historically in the church.

So, when a person is excommunicated, how are they to be treated? They are to be avoided! That is the clear teaching of this passage. I am just now reading the book 'Martyr's Mirror'. Shunning was practiced by Christians prior to the 1500's as well as following. Matthew Poole says of this passage: "...that is, esteem him as a vile person, for so they esteemed all heathens and publicans." Barnes comments like this: "Publicans were men of abandoned character, and the Jews would have no intercourse with them. The meaning of this is, cease to have *religious* intercourse with him, to acknowledge him as a brother. Regard him as obstinate, self-willed, and guilty. It does not mean that we should cease to show kindness to him, and aid him in affliction or trial; for *this* is required towards all men; but it means that we should *disown* him as a Christian brother, and treat him as we do other men not connected with the church." The Family

commentary says: "...let him have no more connection with the church than you would allow to an open idolater."

So, here is the first exception to the rule of greeting one another with a holy greeting.

#### B. 1 Corinthians

The second passage is 1 Corinthians 5. Let us get the drift of the nature of the case described here (read 5:1-2). Now I want us to notice carefully Paul's instruction to this church (read 3-5). First notice; no three step process. Excommunicate! That is the clear instruction. Second, every case of excommunication has one major objective: to bring the person back in repentance. I think that is what it means when it says, "...that the spirit may be saved..."

I want to give us one more purpose so let us read verses 6-8. This second purpose is to keep the church pure. And when sin is allowed in the church, it will seep through the church like yeast in a lump of dough. The church must be protected.

Now I have taken this stand with members of my own family. I have a brother I led to the Lord myself, maybe almost years ago. He was a sickly young man and in his early teens. After he was saved he read a lot of Christian material and grew spiritually and the Lord brought him to health as well, and then he began to leave the Lord. It is a long sad story. But he eventually got into drugs, and then began living together with a woman. That is probably 25 years ago and he still lives with her in this state. I warned him numerous times and told him I would not be able to fellowship with him if he lived like this. I have not seen him now for some 25 years. If he went to family gatherings, I would not take my family.

Some of my own siblings came down on me because of my refusal to get together with him. And I said, "Why don't you get on the case of your

other brother? I cannot change the way he is living but he can. He could be restored to me in one minute if he would deal with his sin, but I cannot make him change. Why don't you get down on him?" But they didn't. I was the bad guy, and so it remains. But here is a case where the holy greeting must be set aside, I believe.

Now I have been asked, can you make such a decision on your own? Does the church not have to excommunicate him first? Well, my brother never belonged to any particular church. And if he did, and they did not excommunicate, I would still maintain the same stand. And you might say, "On what ground?"

Look now at 1 Corinthians 5:9-11. "I wrote to you in my epistle not to keep company with sexually immoral people (if they are excommunicated?). 10 Yet *I* certainly *did* not *mean* with the sexually immoral people of this world (i.e. unbelievers), or with the covetous, or extortioners, or idolaters, since then you would need to go out of the world. 11 But now I have written to you not to keep company with anyone named a brother (who is excommunicated?), who is sexually immoral, or covetous, or an idolater, or a reviler, or a drunkard, or an extortioner--not even to eat with such a person (if he is excommunicated?)."

Who is instructed here? The believers, right? Some people say to me, "Ok, but do you think so and so is really a Christian?" Now notice carefully, that the requirement to practice this is not based on whether **you think** this person is really a Christian. It is based on whether someone is called a Christian. It is someone who is 'named a Christian' because he has professed to be a believer. This person professes to be a Christian. Whether he is truly saved or not is not the question.

Now I want to ask you something, those of you who call yourselves Christians. When you get together with others in your extended family and they are divorced and remarried or 'shacked up' as we say, or they are living in big sin but profess to be

Christians, do you obey the text we just read? Do you shake their hands? Do you company with them? Do you eat with them?

I must tell you another part of my own life's experience. We were to have a family reunion on my Dad's side of the family. My wife and I flew down and for some reason we were a little early. Our reunion was at the Canadian Mennonite University. It is Canadian. It is a university. But it is not truly Mennonite. It is an ungodly school in my estimation. Why do I add that? So you understand my warning.

Nevertheless, a cousin of mine picked us up at the airport and we visited until late. And I think in our conversation he may have said to himself, "I better tell these folk what is about to happen or I might have trouble." So he told me that his daughter who was married to a woman, would be coming and that he had paid their way to come.

Well, we were shocked, and what to do? So I thought about it and called him and said, "I am glad for your gracious forewarning. Now I would like you to pass on to these women how we will handle this. We will not be able to eat with them or shake hands with them, or visit with them like we will with the rest." Then came the first evening of the reunion, and who was there at the door to greet everyone? Two lesbians, one a cousin of mine!

That was a nightmare for us. And when I came nearer my cousin's daughter stretched out her hand, "Oh, hi Phil and Jean!" It was such an enthusiastic greeting. I was shocked and all I could do was shake my head at the audacity. It was not until the next day that I learned they had not been told. Then she tried to be ever so friendly to my wife but she would not shake her hand either. And so she threw up her hands and said, "Oh well, whatever works for you." Well, that worked for us. Then we came to her male looking lady partner and she too wanted to shake hands. I had never dreamt that I would experience



something like this in our family, but there it was.

Well, this did work for us and worked in our favor. Those who were also very uncomfortable with this situation always came to sit with us at meal time because one thing was sure, they would not need to sit with the lesbian couple. And then came Sunday morning. And the cousin of this woman married to this woman, who also had officiated at her wedding, and who is also an EMC lay pastor was overseeing the Sunday morning service, which of course was not really a service. He simply read the account of Abraham and Hagar and opened things for some sharing. I understood his reason for reading this sordid account and took opportunity to warn my extended family about the situation we had run into and our strong disapproval. And the male looking woman, who also was talking about becoming a pastor, said, "Phil thinks I am not a Christian, but I think he's not one." I ask you, do you wait for excommunication before you refuse to shake hands?

Now let me tell you this: If we had greeted them but then avoided them later, not much might have happened. That is what others did. But the very fact that we did not greet them was a very strong message. We were obeying the command not to company with people like this! It was the one thing we did that made the weekend bearable.

C. 1 Thessalonians 3:6-15

Let me read one more passage (2 Thess. 3:6-15, read and comment). The problem in view here is one of laziness. It does not receive immediate action like the case in 1 Corinthians 5. Paul has warned these people a number of times and now gives them these instructions. First, verse 6 (read). Second, verse 14 (read). I ask you, those of you who name the name of Christ, do you obey these commands? Or did Paul, or worse yet, the Lord, waste ink on us? These are very precise commands to believers. And again, if we obey what the Bible says here, no doubt the command to

greet one another with a holy kiss should be set  
aside at this time.

CONCL: What is in a greeting? A whole lot! We take a lot for granted when all is well. A greeting shows approval and acknowledgement, and encouragement. But when Christians greet each other, it is to be with a holy greeting. It is hypocrisy to greet one another as if all is well, when in practice sin has not been dealt with. How can an unholy person greet another with a holy greeting?

However, there are times when even the holy greeting must be set aside. There are times when it is not even right to eat with those who call themselves Christians.

To refrain from greeting someone shows that something is seriously wrong. One should not refrain for minor reasons. In our day, all is grace and love, and disobedience is of little consequence. We speak of grace to such an extent that we set no boundaries. We fail to discipline sinning believers and we fail to set biblical standards, after all, grace covers all. We fail to take seriously the command of Scripture to not company with those who call themselves believers but are living in deep sin. We fail to take Paul's command seriously when he tells us withdraw from every believer who walks disorderly. We fail to take to heart his command to note certain people and then not keep company with them. The teaching of unconditional love and grace abounding are stressed so often that they overshadow other clear commands to deal with sin in the life of professing believers. May God give us wisdom and then may we exercise obedience to His Word. May love and truth become balanced as that little book of 2 John teaches.