

Being a Disciple Part III – Learning to be Holy as Jesus Defines It

Based on Exodus 3:1-6, Leviticus 15:1-11, & Luke 10:25-37

A Message Offered by Toby Jones to the People of ChxUCC on April 21, 2024

As we continue our exploration of what discipleship is and what it really looks like, let's review what we've learned so far from our shepherd Rowan Williams. First, we've seen that disciples are people who are willing to go to the kinds of places and situations that Jesus put himself in. This, of course, includes making a priority of being with broken people – the poor, the lame, the sick, the suffering, and the outcast. Second, we've learned that to be a disciple we must nurture the characteristics of alertness and expectancy, so that we don't miss any of what Jesus has in store for us on a daily basis. In this third phase on the road to discipleship, we're going to explore what it means to be truly holy.

Now, let's be honest and real here...Very few if any of us have positive associations with the word holy, right? For many of us the word conjures up images of stiff, buttoned up, and judg-y Puritans, looking down their noses at any who dare to dance, have a little fun, or enjoy a glass of wine. I often think of those immortal words Mark Twain puts in Huck Finn's mouth to describe one of the outwardly Christian characters he comes up against: "She was good in the worst sense of the word." THAT is how many of us have come to look at holiness. It's that feeling we get when we are being judged by those religious types who live by the letter of the law without any sense whatsoever of its spirit or intention.

And yet, there is a clear call in the scriptures for us to be holy, so we would do well this morning to better understand this somewhat loaded word. The first thing that we've got to understand about the concept of holiness is that there is a clear distinction between how the Hebrew scriptures define it and how Jesus would define AND exemplify it in the 1st century. The Jews of Jesus's day – and for a good 1500 years before Jesus entered the scene – defined holiness as being 'set apart.' God, in Her very essence, was 'set apart' from humanity, and, therefore, Judaism taught that God's people should be 'set apart' as well. We find passages like Leviticus 19:2, where God says to the people of Israel, "You shall be holy as I am holy," or Exodus 19:6, "and you shall be to be a kingdom of priests and a holy nation," says the Lord.

Almost all the early and traditional practices of Judaism, from the worship of only one God to the kosher eating laws to the strict codes for dress were specifically designed to help the Jewish people stand out and be 'set apart' from all surrounding nations. 'You shall be holy as I am holy, says the Lord...You shall be

set apart as I am set apart...' This is why Moses had to take his sandals off at the burning bush. It's also why we find this litany of rules in Leviticus 15 about cleanliness. 'Don't go near anyone who has a bodily discharge or you will be unclean...unholy; Don't touch any person who has a bodily discharge or you will be unclean/unholy. Don't sit on an animal that an unclean person has sat upon or you'll be unclean. Don't touch or lay on a bed that a person with a bodily discharge has laid upon or you will be unclean/unholy,' and the list goes on and on.

Now, we must be very, very careful not to be unfairly critical of our Jewish brothers and sisters and their understanding of holy as 'set apart.' Remember, Yahweh was trying to nurture monotheism – a completely unprecedented concept in the Ancient Near East, where all the surrounding nations were polytheistic. Israel was going to need to stand out and be set apart if this new Yahwistic faith was going to have any chance whatsoever to take root. But by the time the Rabbi Jesus came along, we can see that the religious leaders' understanding of holiness had become the tail that was wagging the entire dog of Judaism.

It's not an exaggeration to say that almost every one of Jesus's conflicts with the Pharisees was about their understanding of holiness and the implications of it for Judaism. Jesus's understanding of holiness couldn't have been more opposite than theirs. As Rowan Williams puts it, "Holiness in the New Testament is a matter of Jesus going right into the middle of the mess and the suffering of human nature. For him, being holy is being absolutely involved, not being absolutely separated." Williams continues, "For Jesus, holiness means going into the heart of where it's most difficult for human beings to be human. Jesus goes outside the city to the place where people suffer and are humiliated." And because Jesus went there – to those kinds of places – so should we.

This brings us to the very heart of the Good Samaritan story, a story, I would argue, that Christians have missed the true point and power of for hundreds and hundreds of years. Oh, we know that it's a story about helping people in need and not just passing by. We just never realized that Jesus specifically designed this story to be a direct assault on the Jewish understanding of holiness. Let's check it out. Why don't you grab a pew Bible and follow along with me in Luke 10...Ready?

Now, before we even begin with Luke 10, we Christians have got to understand that there is no possible way to understand Jesus's true point of the Good Samaritan parable without first knowing and understanding Leviticus 15:1-

11. That's the passage we read earlier containing all these prohibitions about touching a person with a bodily discharge or even touching anything that the person with the discharge has touched or had contact with. You remember? What were the specifics again? If you want to be holy and set apart, don't touch a person with a bodily discharge; don't ride a horse that has been ridden by a person with a bodily discharge; don't touch or lay in a bed that a person with a bodily discharge has lain in – not if you want to be holy as Judaism has traditionally defined holiness. Are you with me? NOW we are ready for the Good Samaritan.

Verse 30 – a man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho when he fell into the hands of robbers and was beaten and left half dead. Now we know from verses 31 and 32 that those two priests walking down that same road saw that man and crossed to the other side of the road and just walked on by. Any idea why these Jewish priests did that...? Because they wanted to remain holy and set apart as their faith had traditionally defined it. You think that beaten man was bleeding? Might the brother have any bodily discharges going on? We know he did, because in verse 34, we're told that Samaritan poured oil on and bandaged his wounds. There was bodily discharge happening here, and that Samaritan man touched both the man and the discharges! What did he do next...? He picked the man up and put him where...? On the Samaritan's own horse! Remember that from Leviticus 15? What did he do next? He took him to an inn, picked him up again – bodily discharges and all – and took him inside and laid him on a bed. Now we've got bodily discharges on the bed!

Now, does anybody see what Jesus is doing here with this "nice" little story about helping someone in need...? Jesus is taking on and redefining the entire Jewish understanding of what it means to be holy. According to Jesus, those two priests who walked by the wounded man on the other side of the road weren't being holy at all, though they *thought* they were. Heck, those two would say that what motivated them to walk on by without helping was holiness and their need to be set apart. But Huck Finn might have said that the two priests were being holy in the worst sense of the word...and I dare say Jesus would agree.

I love how Rowan Williams puts it in the end of his chapter on holiness. "We start on the path of holiness looking at Jesus and what he is like in the Gospels, and we move to exploring where human beings are, what their needs are...and how we may help them be more human.

You see, folks, as disciples of Jesus, we really do need to be holy... just not in the 'set apart,' holier than thou, steer clear of any bodily discharge sort of way.

As Williams puts it, “there is not contrast between holiness and deep involvement in the world. On the contrary,” Williams continues, “the most holy – who is Jesus – is the most involved, most at the heart of the human experience.” Williams then explains how we will know that we are in the presence of a truly, authentically holy person, as opposed to someone who is holy in the worst sense of the word. He writes, “the effect the wrong kind of holy person has on others is to make them feel guilty, frustrated, and unhappy...When we encounter the falsely holy person, he/she make us feel worse about ourselves.” We’ve probably all had that experience, right? I suspect that’s how those two “holy” priests made the beaten man feel when they passed by on the other side. “In contrast,” Williams continues, truly “holy people – true saints – actually make you feel better than you are...the holy person somehow enlarges your world, opens you up...These truly holy ones have made me feel better about myself – not worse.” And so they should, for “God is big enough to deal with and work with actual compromised and imperfect people,” and so should his holy ones be. Amen!

Folks, being holy – once Jesus came to town – is no longer about being set apart or somehow morally better than others. Holiness, once Jesus came to town, ceased to be about cleanliness or avoiding sinful, unclean people. And yet, somehow the Church, the Christian Church just keeps repeating the same mistakes that the pre-Jesus Jewish temples made. Our Christian churches keep trying to set ourselves apart from the world by excluding more and more people, by keeping our distance from more and more people. As Williams puts it, every time the Church “comes up with another scheme for making the Church a holier place, it usually means making sure that some people don’t get in, or that some people who are in get thrown out. But when the Church tries to become holy in that way, it almost always becomes an appalling mess.”

Brothers and sisters, let me be clear. Jesus wants his disciples and his Church to be holy...but not in the worst sense of the word, not in the ‘set apart’ sense of the word, not in the pulling back from the rest of humanity sense of the word. The holiness that Jesus wants and demands of us as disciples AND as a church is that we more fully enter those places where our fellow humans are beaten and bloodied and abandoned by the roadside. Our holiness must be the kind that makes others feel better about themselves – not worse. Our holiness must take the shape of being so overwhelmed by the goodness and extraordinariness of God that others don’t even really notice us; they just get caught up in the extraordinary goodness of God. Our ancestors misunderstood holiness. If we follow Jesus’s lead, we’ll get back on the true holiness track. Amen.