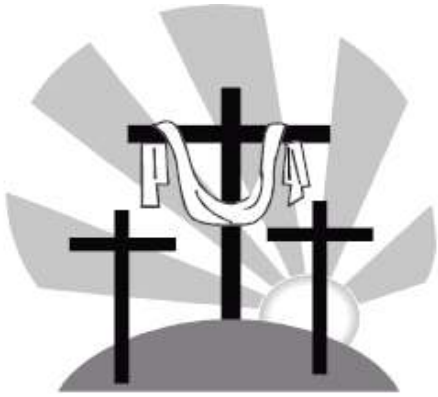


"Be Holy... As God Is Holy"

a sermon by Matthew Christians
based on *Leviticus 19:1-2, 15-18*

Twenty-fourth Sunday after Pentecost
October 26, 2008



Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God the Father and Christ Jesus our Lord. Amen.

Dear Friends in Christ, hear the Word of the Lord from Leviticus chapter 19. The LORD says: "*You shall be holy because I, the LORD your God, am holy*" (v.2).

It's so straightforward, I almost don't know where to begin. You wouldn't think that we would need to make any more comments about it. The wish of your God, the wish your creator and your redeemer is for you to be good. "Be blameless," He says. "Be good and right in all that you say and do." It's the standard that God holds His people to, and, I think, it's the standard that (in theory, at least) we all would like to hold ourselves to, as well. No one wants to be wrong, no one wants to be a bad person, no one wants to be blamed when things go wrong. We want to be holy. That is to say, not in say... but removed from sin.

And yet, every day, I see... in the lives of the people around me... in my own life... in the lives of you sitting right here today... every day I see (not holiness, but) some of the most unholy words and actions that I have ever been ashamed to witness. You, and I, are a long way from holy. The truth of the matter is, quite apart from what God might expect of us, you and I are most definitely NOT "*holy as [God] is holy*."

And in case you're not sure what God means... to make sure we don't misunderstand what God means by 'holiness,' the good Lord conveniently gives us a list of examples in our reading today. There's a whole slew of examples in Leviticus. In today's reading we find just a few examples: Justice should be impartial, God says. People's reputations should be upheld. Do you

best to protect your neighbor from any physical harm. Hate no person, and do not repay evil in kind. The list actually goes on; maybe if you have a spare minute this afternoon you could look up these in Leviticus and see what else is there. You might be surprised at all the things God cares about, at the long list of expectations that God has for you.

The list is long because God's standards are high. God has given us a categorical and absolute standard according to which we must live. No exceptions. My parents used to use a phrase whenever us kids were trying to wiggle out of doing something we didn't want to do: it was that they didn't want to hear any "ifs, ands or buts."

That's what God is saying. There's no qualifications. No negotiations. No mitigating circumstances. "*Be holy*," God says, "and I don't want to hear any 'ifs ands or buts.' about it." And there's the problem: we always try to find a way out. We do try always to add those 'ifs, ands or buts' to God's commands. Well... maybe not the 'ands,' but the 'ifs and buts' part at least.

For example: "Yes, I know that we're not supposed to bear grudges. So, all right, I'll forgive him as long as he says he's sorry." Or how about this one: "I know that sex outside of marriage is wrong, but we really love each other and want to get married, so it will be OK." Here's a classic... how many times have you yourself said this one: "Well, I probably shouldn't tell you this, but did you hear what Adam did the other day?"

Those are just a few examples. There could be more. Our congregation is full of examples. Marriages broken because we don't feel like putting our spouse's needs before our own. Families torn apart by constant bickering and backbiting. Friendships ended over perceived slights and stupid arguments. People who act in ways that are mean, greedy, petty, arrogant, selfish, bigoted.

The old line about being a pastor is this: it's that being a pastor would be the greatest job in the world... if only you didn't have to deal with the people in the congregation all the time.

And so we ask ourselves, how can we expect anything good from God when we are such horrible examples of humanity? I mean, really, how can we "*be holy*" if we can barely be civil with each other?

To which the answer is: we can't. How can we be holy if we can barely be civil with each other? We can't. It's impossible for anyone to be holy by his or her own effort. We cannot

by ourselves be the way we are supposed to be. What I hope and pray you realize this morning is the truth that we all sang together a few minutes ago. It's the tail end of that "Glory to God in the highest" song. We sang, "for Thou only art holy," which means "You, God... You alone are holy" (LSB p.188). You, God, You are the Holy One. Not us. We may be many things, but one thing we're not is holy.

Thanks be to God, our holiness comes from Him and not from us. Our holiness comes, not from our actions, but from God's actions. We are holy because the good Lord says we are, not because we act that way. Two thousand years ago in a little country called Judea, the Lord of heaven took decisive action to make sure that happens, to make sure you have forgiveness, to make sure that you are given the holiness of God because you cannot earn it.

It's in Christ Jesus... it's in Jesus who is God become human. Jesus came to share our humanity... but not just to share it... Jesus came to transform it. He came to die the death our unholiness demands... so that He can give us the holiness God's love demands. Because of Christ on the cross, for all who believe, your sin is transferred from you and given to Him. All the unholy things you do or say or think or feel are given over to Jesus and replaced with His holiness.

That holiness has come to each one of us who have been baptized into Christ's name. The baptismal waters wash the ugliness from us and replace it with the Holy Spirit. That holiness came to us again this morning as I spoke the words of God's forgiveness to you. All the sin that had piled up was, in a moment, wiped away.

And again, in a few moments, that holiness will come to each of us individually as Jesus offers to you His body and His blood...His perfect physical presence given to us in the bread and the wine to make us holy.

The beauty of this religion God has given us that, instead of excusing our unholiness or overlooking our unholiness, God deals with our unholiness. He acknowledges our sin for what it is and enforces the punishment He has decreed for it. The thing is, that for us who have been baptized, God simply enforces that punishment on His Son Jesus and not on us.

The Gospel message, the good news message of God is this: Jesus Christ died for your sin, for your unholiness. By His death, your life is changed. And by His rising again from the dead, you have received the magic touch of eternal life, and you are now different from others

because of Jesus. You are holy to God and forever special in His sight.

For all this, what can we do but praise God for His holy love and deliverance? So thank God daily in your life. Say "thank you" daily to God by striving always to live the kind of life God wants for you. By "*loving your neighbor as yourself*" (v.18). To "*love your neighbor as yourself*" means not excusing yourself from the care of others, but instead— imitating and duplicating the work of Christ on earth as you deal with other people.

And in case you're not sure what this means, God gives us lots of examples. For example: in love, become nonjudgmental and treat others fairly instead of choosing favorites. In holiness, be honest in what you say about others and only say what is good in the situation. When your neighbor motivation is unclear, do you best to "explain everything in the kindness way" (Small Catechism, 8th Commandment). In holy love, forgive others and accept them as needing the same kindness and consideration that God has shown to you.

The list goes on. Because you are a loved and holy child of God, extend God's peace to those you have disagreements with. Go to the cross, and there, at that place where judgment and condemnation cease, settle our differences once and for all.

By the power of God's love, by the power of God's Holy Spirit, we God's holy people can and will do to others as God has done to us.

Now, in case you think God is asking the impossible... remember, God is not asking you to love people or else. What's He's asking you to do is remember the love that Jesus lived out in the world. Remember the love that God so freely extends to you. Because the Father loves and accepts and helps us for the sake of Jesus Christ, we are His people. And as His people, when we are challenged to be loving, to serve others... that is exactly what we can do.

You can "*be holy*" because Jesus died on the cross to make you holy. You can "*be holy*" in your daily life because you are His. Because God love the world and sent His only Son among us so that you will not perish. In Jesus' name, Amen.

May the peace of God –which surpasses understanding– guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.

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