

## “Holiness”

(Sixth in a series of messages: Living in the Kingdom: Values That Matter)

By Dr. Mark Smith

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Isaiah 6:1-6, 1 Peter 1:13-16

All the big to do about Halloween and ghosts and goblins and witches this time of the year has tended to overshadow an important celebration of the church: All Saints Day – which we happen to be celebrating today. As the name implies, it is a day to remember all the saints - known and unknown, who have gone before us and who have served God faithfully. The origins of this special day are kind of foggy, but it began to be celebrated in the church to recognize extraordinary people of faith who didn't already have their own particular feast day on the church calendar. All Saints Day has been celebrated on Nov. 1 since the 9th century.

Now when you think about a “saint” – what images come to mind? Perhaps we think of a kind of Christian hall of fame in which the Lord's "heavy hitters" figure prominently...you know, people like Saints Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John; St Peter; St. Paul, St Patrick and St. Francis and so on....

We might think of a saint as someone who is found in stained glass with a halo around his or her head, a person so morally perfect and so far above the rest of us ordinary Christians that he or she is more angel than human. We think of the saints as members of an elite group of Christians who were unusually good and faithful during their earthly life, and who now sit in heaven with jewels in their crowns. Their achievements seem so far beyond us that we can hardly relate to them at all.

Biblically speaking, however a “saint” is far from being super spiritual and morally perfect; in fact, a “saint” happens to be anyone who professes faith in Christ and who seeks to serve him faithfully. The Apostle Paul addresses many of his letters to the "saints" in a certain place: to the church in Philippi he writes, *"Paul and Timothy, servants of Christ, to all the saints in Christ Jesus ....."* And to the Corinthians he writes: *"To the church of God in Corinth, together with all the saints throughout Achaia..."* Paul is not writing to the spiritual elite but to the average members of the church – people like you and me. *We are saints!*

Now the word “saint” does mean – “holy one.” The word "saint" comes from a Latin word "sanctus" which in turn is the translation of the Greek word for "holy." Saints are “holy people.” Of course, we normally don't think of ourselves as being “holy.” We associate holiness with perfect behavior; we think of someone who resists the sins of the flesh, doesn't drink or carouse or swear and who lives by all the rules - perfectly. Or we may think of a holy person in negative terms – as someone who is good and knows it – they walk two feet above the ground with their nose in the air - someone "holier than thou.” Or by "holy" we think of some mysterious property in persons or things that makes them "sacred" - almost too holy to touch.

But the label "holy" as it is used in the Bible means, above all, to be "set apart." A holy person or holy thing is "set apart" for the service of God.

- In the Old Testament the vessels used in the temple worship - the bowls and utensils and so on - were holy not because of some strange divine or mysterious property about them. They were "holy" in the sense that these material things were set apart for the service of God...

- The priests who used the vessels and directed the worship of God were holy not because of their moral perfection, but because they had been separated for the service of God....
- The people of Israel in the Old Testament were called holy, not because they were morally perfect - far from it - but because they had been "set apart" from among all the nations of the world to be God's "treasured possession" by which God would bless the world. *"Although the whole earth is mine, you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation"* he told Israel through Moses.

So then, you and I, as God's people, have been set apart to live for God. We are to live differently from all the other peoples of the earth, for we belong to God and we take our marching orders from God. We are holy. We are "saints" – holy ones.

Not only are we already holy, but we are to "be holy." Holiness is not only a current condition but something to be practiced and longed for.

Listen to Peter (1 Peter 1:13-16):

<sup>1Pe 1:13</sup> Therefore, prepare your minds for action; be self-controlled; set your hope fully on the grace to be given you when Jesus Christ is revealed.

<sup>1Pe 1:14</sup> As obedient children, do not conform to the evil desires you had when you lived in ignorance.

<sup>1Pe 1:15</sup> But just as he who called you is holy, so be holy in all you do;

<sup>1Pe 1:16</sup> for it is written: "Be holy, because I am holy."

To be "holy" is to reflect who God is. And God is, above all, holy. Of all God's attributes, holiness is central. Around God's throne, the angels are constantly singing, *"Holy, Holy, Holy, is the Lord God Almighty, the whole earth is full of his glory."* The three-fold "holy, holy, holy" serves to emphasize this attribute of God. God is the Holy One who is set apart from his creation and from all creatures. God is far above all these in his majesty and glory. God is set apart in his greatness - far beyond all that we can think or imagine. God is distinct in his awesomeness and power. There is no one like our God; God is set apart from the world – he is wholly other.

To be sure, God is holy as well in a second sense: God not only is set apart, but possesses absolute moral purity – which is why Isaiah was so terrified to be in God's presence: *"Woe is me, a man of unclean lips!"* In God, there is a total absence of evil. Think about that. God is pure goodness itself - God is pure love, pure justice, pure wisdom, without taint of sin or evil. In God there is no darkness at all. God is holy - absolutely pure and morally perfect.

So you and I, the saints of God, have been set apart, to live lives that reflect God's character. We are to reflect his moral purity. Holiness is becoming wholly like God, thinking like God, acting as God would. To be holy is to live as God would have us live, reflecting his righteousness, his love, his justice and peace in all our relationships and in every realm of our lives. We will never be morally perfect, but we are to nevertheless pursue a life of holiness.

*"Be holy, as I am holy,"* says the Lord.

Holiness is commanded of *all* God's people in Holy Scripture. It is not just for ministers and priests and monks. It is not just for missionaries or for a few dedicated Sunday school teachers. God has called every Christian to a holy life.

- Holiness is the purpose of God's choice: *"He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him."*
- It is the purpose of Jesus' death: *"Jesus Christ...gave Himself for us to redeem us from all iniquity and to purify for Himself a people of His own who are zealous for good deeds."*
- It is the purpose of the Holy Spirit's indwelling: *"God has not called us for uncleanness, but in holiness...who gives his Holy Spirit to you."* God's purpose is to make us holy; it is to make us like God. And in so doing, we are set apart from others.

*"Be holy" the Lord says to you and me. He is saying to us, "Live differently. You are mine. You are a holy people. You are called to live by different standards. You are called to reflect my righteousness and my character in your thoughts and in your actions. It matters profoundly how you live. Live in the light. Live according to my grand design for your life. For when you do, you can live a happy and fulfilled life. You will find freedom and joy. And you will bring others to my light. Come now, I am sending you out to be a blessing..."*

Holiness does not come easily to us. It is a cooperative process between us and God. God, through his grace, makes a new relationship with him possible, but then we must work to build his character in us. Christian character building comes through the practice of spiritual disciplines like bible study, prayer, worship, gathering regularly with other Christians, and giving of our time, and talent and treasure. Holiness is costly – it comes through blood, sweat and tears. It takes daily obedience. And it takes *time* – actually a *lifetime* of character building. Those saints whom we recognize as being special servants of God were especially persevering in becoming more like God.

Some of you may remember singing the old hymn, *"Take Time to Be Holy."* It takes time to be holy; one cannot be holy in a hurry. And in our day and age of instant everything, that isn't easy. Character building takes time; it takes patience. It takes work. Eugene Peterson has observed:

*It is not difficult in our world to get a person interested in the message of the Gospel; it is terrifically difficult to sustain the interest. Millions of people in our culture make decisions for Christ, but there is a dreadful attrition rate. Many claim to have been born again, but the evidence for mature Christian discipleship is slim. In our kind of culture anything, even news about God, can be sold if it is packaged freshly; but when it loses its novelty, it goes on the garbage heap. There is a great market for religious experience in our world; there is little enthusiasm for the patient acquisition of virtue, little inclination to sign up for a long apprenticeship in what earlier generations of Christians called holiness.*

We have been set apart by God to live lives that reflect his awesome character. It takes perseverance, to be sure. Fortunately, it is not all up to us. The indwelling Spirit changes us as well; to use a fancy theological word, he "sanctifies us" – he makes us holy.

A little boy came into the church with his mother one day. The little boy looked around at all the stained

glass windows. The little boy said to his mother, "*Mother, who are all of those people up in those stained glass windows?*" His mother didn't quite know how to answer him. She really didn't recognize Jesus at the temple when he was 12 over there. So she said to the little boy, '*Son, those people are saints.*' And the little boy walked up and down the center aisle, looked at all the windows all over again, and then he said to his mother, "*Mother, a saint must be a person who lets the light shine through.*"

Congratulations, you and I have been canonized as saints by God himself! We have been set apart to reflect his glory. May we live such transparent lives before God that His light will shine through! Amen.