

## HOLINESS

**James 1:18** Of his own will begat he us with the word of truth, that we should be a kind of firstfruits of his creatures.

For our week of prayer this year, the subject is Personal Holiness. I must confess I have grown up with a certain aversion to the word 'holiness' ... It is not that I don't like it, but it is because of how it was used when I was growing up. ... In the Christian circles of which I was a part there was a doctrine preached continuously, - almost *ad nauseum*, - which continues to make me shudder. It was known by such titles as the 'doctrine of sinless perfection', 'entire sanctification', or 'a second work of grace'. Basically, it is a doctrine which teaches this 'second work of grace' (- salvation by faith is the 'first' work of grace, although it is subject to the will of man who it is claimed could refuse to accept God's offer, known in Church History as 'semi-Pelagianism' and 'Arminianism') ... this 'second work of grace', - so the doctrine teaches, - removes inbred or original sin, so that the Christian enters a state of 'perfect love' (as John Wesley described it), or, - 'sinless perfection' ... where they have absolutely no sin whatsoever, at this present moment, in this life.

... That was a doctrine I was brought up listening to, and I was surrounded by many who believed themselves to be sinlessly perfect ... and well dare you try to argue the point with them! ... So, that is why I have had to work my way through using this term 'holiness'. It reminds me of many individuals who claimed to be holy, and yet lacked the credentials to confirm what they preached!

On the other hand, I had another group of Christian friends, within the 'charismatic' sphere, who were more relaxed in their understanding of holiness. Holiness, for them, was simply another way of identifying yourself as a Christian. It did not particularly relate to any kind of lifestyle or behaviour. Simply put, because you are a Christian ... you are holy!

So, that is the background from which I came to this subject of holiness. ... Now, *holiness* is one of those words which is very special to Christians, so, let's explore what it means as we turn to the Epistle of James. ... There were three prominent men called James in the New Testament, - James the disciple (and brother of John ... and son of Zebedee), another disciple called James who was the son of Alphaeus, and James the brother of Jesus. The one who wrote this epistle was most likely the brother of Jesus, and he wrote, **James 1:16** *Do not err, my beloved brethren. <sup>17</sup> Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, and*

cometh down from the Father of lights, with whom is no variableness, neither shadow of turning. <sup>18</sup> Of his own will begat he us with the word of truth, that we should be a kind of firstfruits of his creatures. ... Let's read that verse again, <sup>18</sup> Of his own will begat he [*God*] us with the word of truth, that we should be a kind of firstfruits of his creatures.

... a kind of firstfruits of his creatures ... That is referring to a certain type of 'product' God has specifically created us to be. From the beginning, His intentions were clear, **Gen. 1:26** And God said, Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. Even though sin entered, He continued to require the same high standard, for example, **Lev. 11:44** I am the LORD your God: ye shall therefore sanctify yourselves [*set yourselves apart so as to live differently to others*], and ye shall be holy; for I am holy ... And no less an imperative was prescribed in the New Testament, for example, **1 Peter 1:16** Be ye holy; for I am holy. Holiness refers to a distinction.

Despite the circles I moved around in when I was growing up, I suspect the real reason, - 'deep down', - I am uncomfortable with this word holiness is because it requires so much from me, and I know that what it requires does not come naturally ... and neither does it sit comfortably with my nature. ... Naturally, - by my own nature, - I am not holy, - it is not my nature to be like God. I was not born holy, for like the psalmist, **Ps. 51:5** I was shapen in iniquity; and in sin did my mother conceive me. ... *That* is my true nature, and anything contrary goes against how I truly am. ... I know that not just *all* have sinned, but *I* know *I* have sinned, and *I* am a sinner. I fully understand what Paul was saying to the Romans, **Rom. 7:18** For I know that in me (that is, in my flesh,) dwelleth no good thing: for to will is present with me; but how to perform that which is good I find not. <sup>19</sup> For the good that I would I do not: but the evil which I would not, that I do. ... <sup>21</sup> I find then a law, that, when I would do good, evil is present with me. <sup>22</sup> For I delight in the law of God after the inward man: <sup>23</sup> But I see another law in my members, warring against the law of my mind, and bringing me into captivity to the law of sin which is in my members. <sup>24</sup> O wretched man that I am! I fully understand, - it doesn't have to be explained to me what he meant. ... Many other things Paul says I have to think hard about, ... but I understand what he was saying there *perfectly*!

But what James is teaching us is that the person has to be holy in order to have a relationship with God ... A relationship with God, though, is not what I have been born with, and James explains how we are not created holy, for we are born sinful ... full of sin. ... In other words, we are not born in a way that does not automatically allow God to accept us into His Heaven for if He accepted us into Heaven with our sin, - that is, the way we were born, - Heaven would soon

become as defiled as this earth for Heaven would not be Heaven any longer ... So, that is the diagnosis from God's Word.

Ah, but it is not my fault, - that is my excuse ... It is the fault of other outside circumstances. No, says James, **13 Let no man say when he is tempted, I am tempted of God: for God cannot be tempted with evil, neither tempteth he any man: 14 But every man is tempted, when he is drawn away of his own lust, and enticed. ...** In the Garden of Eden, Adam not only blamed Eve, but he also blamed the Lord for giving him Eve, **Gen. 3:12 the man said, The woman whom thou gavest to be with me, she gave me of the tree, and I did eat. ...** But Adam's sin was due to his own personal fault!

And that is what James was getting across to his readers ... Every human being is drawn away because of the desires within them which they find all-too-easy and natural to follow, instead of following God. So, no one can blame others for their attraction to sin for it comes from within our very own selves! ... It is not God's fault, and neither is it anyone else's fault. Yes, of course, we get to be like the company we keep, - and that is why we should keep good company, - ... but what leads us into sinful company is our sinful desire ... so it initially starts inside us! ... That is the reality of being born a sinner, - we are not born holy! ... And sin cannot abide holiness, and holiness cannot abide sin!

Where does sin come from? Jesus gives us the answer, **Mt. 15:19 out of the heart proceed evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, false witness, blasphemies ...** That is where sin comes from ... Where does holiness come from? Holiness comes from God, **James 1:17 Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, and cometh down from the Father of lights, with whom is no variableness, neither shadow of turning. ...** He is the only source. The eighty-year-old Moses sang, **Ex. 15:11 Who is like unto thee, O LORD, among the gods? who is like thee, glorious in holiness ...** Hannah, the mother of Samuel, prayed, **I Sam. 2:2 There is none holy as the LORD ...** Once again, holiness is not a natural characteristic. It is something completely outside of us. That means it has to be given ... and for that holiness to be given, it must come from the Source. And there is only one Source, and that is God. It is not a church, a religion, a person, a set of rules ... the only origin of Godly holiness is God, and that in itself defines what holiness is for to be holy is to be like God.

Now, that is impossible you say, - neither you nor me could be as holy as God! ... I would not disagree with you, however, only those who are as holy as God will be allowed into Heaven. John, who wrote the Book of Revelation, was describing the new heaven and the new earth and he was instructed to write, **Rev.**

21:27 there shall in no wise enter into it anything that defileth. So, how is it possible for a sinner to be welcomed by God into Heaven?

There is only one way, and here is how ... James wrote, **James 1:18** *Of his own [God's] will begat he us with the word of truth, that we should be a kind of firstfruits of his creatures.* Believer, you are on your way to Heaven because it is the will of God that you are saved. It is the will of God that shaped everything about your circumstances so that you would be brought to believe in Jesus Christ as your Saviour, and be saved. ... Yes, under normal circumstances, you would have rejected Him ... but as far as God was concerned, when He began His work in you, - away back in eternity, before you were born, - *Of his own will begat he us with the word of truth, that we should be a kind of firstfruits of his creatures.* ... In time, He brought about what He had planned in eternity.

Concerning your natural birth ... Did your parents set up an agreement with you, and you gave them permission for you to be born, and to become their child? No, of course not ... and in the same way, you were born again through the work of the Holy Spirit when God chose you, and He showed you and made you aware of the truth of His Word concerning your need of the Saviour, and you accepted Him when you believed. Paul explained it like this, **Eph. 2:1** *And you hath he quickened, who were dead in trespasses and sins; 2 Wherein in time past ye walked according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that now worketh in the children of disobedience: 3 Among whom also we all had our conversation in times past in the lusts of our flesh, fulfilling the desires of the flesh and of the mind; and were by nature the children of wrath, even as others. 4 But God, who is rich in mercy, for his great love wherewith he loved us, 5 Even when we were dead in sins, hath quickened us together with Christ, (by grace ye are saved;) ... God made us alive in the Lord Jesus Christ ... Why? ... because He loved us, and Paul continued, 6 And hath raised us up together, and made us sit together in heavenly places in Christ Jesus: 7 That in the ages to come he might shew the exceeding riches of his grace in his kindness toward us through Christ Jesus. ... Through the work of the Lord Jesus, God has lifted us up and out, and changed us ... and 'set us apart' for Himself ... And *that* is what holiness is! It is the same as what He said to Israel in the Old Testament, **Is. 43:1** *I have redeemed thee, I have called thee by thy name; thou art mine. ... 7 Even every one that is called by my name: for I have created him for my glory ... And that is the purpose of holiness! You are set apart. You are no longer your own for you have been bought with a price, - the price Jesus paid for you on the cross when He shed His precious blood, - and that is why Paul wrote to the Corinthians, 1 Cor. 6:20* *therefore glorify God in your body, and in your spirit, which are God's.**

And that is holiness, **Heb. 12:14** Follow peace with all men, and holiness, without which no man shall see the Lord. When God saves you, He saves you to follow Him according to the instructions He gives you in His Word. And that is why you need to read God's Word, and to study it. That is why you need to understand what it is saying for you to grow as a Christian. That is why you need to find out with other Christians how to be the best you can be for God. ... It is not a competition, but it is a passion that drives you from the inside.

Paul told Timothy, **II Tim. 2:15** Study to shew thyself approved unto God, ... rightly dividing the word of truth. ... Study the Bible to understand how God would have you live for Him, and it will keep you away from becoming caught up, - as he went on to tell Timothy, - in 'profane and vain babblings', for you can so easily become tainted with things that are no good for your spiritual growth in the Lord Jesus ... Holiness, - a seeking after God, - will guard you against the dangers of false religion.

And just as James says, it is not an ornamental or an external change on the outside ... it is the change which takes place from the inside, which means you become a brand new creation in Christ, **II Cor. 5:17** old things are passed away; behold, all things are become new. When Jesus comes into your life, He changes it for His glory ... and that is the evidence He has come in. ... If someone breaks into your house, you can see the signs that tell you they have been there ... and when Jesus comes into your life, He also puts the evidence there that He is your Master, and the confirmation is described in that word, 'holiness' ... And that is holiness, - Jesus and me, me and Jesus.

It is a conversion when you are saved, - become a Christian, - and immediately following the conversion is transformation ... and the transformation keeps on working throughout your whole life. You have the desire in your heart to do everything for God, - even the simplest ... and then when you look back, you can see how He even used *that* in your growth as a Christian. And that is the proof you are a Christian ... you want to be like Him ... and that is *holiness*.

But I don't want to be odd. I don't want to be one of those strange people who don't live in the real world. ... Yes, they 'turn me off' too, - I don't want to be like them either, and that is why, - I said at the beginning, - I had to revisit what holiness really is. ... It is not about some self-righteous person looking down from their self-constructed ivory tower ... I am not commanded to be like them ... It is Jesus Who I am required to be like for He is my example, and it is how He shows me in His Word that I must follow. ... *That* is the path of holiness,

and that is the path every professing child of God must follow, **James 1:18** that we should be a kind of firstfruits of his creatures.

That word, - ‘firstfruits’, - has a very special significance for the Jews ... and James was a Jew. When he used it, he would have been thinking about the Old Testament offering of the firstfruits, for example, **Lev. 23:9** And the LORD spake unto Moses, saying, **10** Speak unto the children of Israel, and say unto them, When ye be come into the land which I give unto you, and shall reap the harvest thereof, then ye shall bring a sheaf of the firstfruits of your harvest unto the priest: **11** And he shall wave the sheaf before the LORD, to be accepted for you: on the morrow after the sabbath the priest shall wave it. **12** And ye shall offer that day when ye wave the sheaf an he lamb without blemish of the first year for a burnt offering unto the LORD. **13** And the meat offering thereof shall be two tenth deals of fine flour mingled with oil, an offering made by fire unto the LORD for a sweet savour: and the drink offering thereof shall be of wine, the fourth part of an hin. **14** And ye shall eat neither bread, nor parched corn, nor green ears, until the selfsame day that ye have brought an offering unto your God: it shall be a statute for ever throughout your generations in all your dwellings. ... The people would bring a sheaf of grain to the priest, - the first sheaf of the harvest, - and he would wave it before the Lord. Before the people would harvest any more of the crop and store its contents, the very first sheaf was presented before the Lord. ... *That* was their very best, ... their acknowledgement of His goodness towards them.

And there is something else here in this word ... By definition, the ‘firstfruits’ are the *first fruits*, - they signify the beginning, in anticipation of the promise of the final and full crop. ... Here, James describes the children of God as the beginnings of much more to come. ... Peter, in his epistle, tells us this world is not going to last, **II Peter 3:10** But the day of the Lord will come as a thief in the night; in the which the heavens shall pass away with a great noise, and the elements shall melt with fervent heat, the earth also and the works that are therein shall be burned up. ... **13** Nevertheless we, according to his promise, look for new heavens and a new earth, wherein dwelleth righteousness.

That means God is going to destroy this present creation and form a *new* creation, - a new heaven and a new earth ... John describes it, **Rev. 21:2** And I John saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down from God out of heaven, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. **3** And I heard a great voice out of heaven saying, Behold, the tabernacle of God is with men, and he will dwell with them, and they shall be his people, and God himself shall be with them, and be their God. **4** And God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes; and there shall be no more death, neither sorrow, nor crying, neither shall there be any more pain: for the former things are passed away. **5** And he that sat upon the throne said, Behold, I make all things new. And he said unto

me, Write: for these words are true and faithful. ... Now, that is God's promise to us, - that is what He will eventually bring to pass ... and the Church, - every born-again believer who trusts in Jesus Christ as their Saviour and whose life displays it, - ... they are the 'firstfruits', - the 'beginnings', - of that great harvest He will one day gather in. ... That is what Jesus spoke about when He referred to the harvest of souls at the end of the age, when He will gather in all who are His, **Mt. 13:30** in the time of harvest I will say to the reapers, ... gather the wheat into my barn. ... The 'firstfruits' first, - *now*, - and *then*, the whole harvest of His saved and redeemed people.

And 'holiness' is the work of God that sets His people apart, for His glory, as Paul explained, **Eph. 2:10** we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus unto good works, which God hath before ordained that we should walk in them. ... Similarly, Isaiah described God as the potter, and we are the clay, **Is. 64:8** But now, O LORD, thou art our father; we are the clay, and thou our potter; and we all are the work of thy hand.

That means the new life we presently have in the Lord Jesus is a taste of what we are going to have in Him when He comes back again and we shall be with Him forever. ... And holiness is the guarantee His grace has been applied, and we are 'standing out' for Him as living examples of His saving and keeping power, for **James 1:18** Of his own will begat he us with the word of truth, that we should be a kind of firstfruits of his creatures.