

Is Holiness Passe?

Romans 6:15-23; Hebrews 12:14

Slide 1

Because of COVID-19, today, more than ever, our communities are in need of money.

Now, I can't say that I have all the answers, but I've thought about this and have come up with a solution for our budget issues in Tarrant County.

It is a simple little plan that, with a little extra effort, can shrink our financial shortfall. My plan... everyone must drive faster.

If we all used a little extra energy to push our accelerators a little closer to the floor, I think the accumulative affect will be a huge swell of cash into our local economy. Don't laugh. Follow me here.

If we're driving faster, we're using more gas, which means we must buy more gas. This, in turn, leads to greater taxable revenues and taxes are the primary means to fund local governments.

But that's not all. Faster speeds also mean more fender benders, which equates to an increase in auto-body work, auto sales, tires sales, auto repairs, increases in insurance, health care services, etc.

These increases will also lead to increases in other industries. Just let your imagination run wild. All these increases will lead to a greater tax base, and so on and so forth. But this isn't all.

One of the real beauties of this plan is that it has a built-in mechanism to flood money immediately into the system. With the increase in speed would also come an increase in speeding and moving violation tickets.

The immediate influx of revenue generated might, all by itself, offset the shortfall. After all, where violations of the law abounds, cash abounds all the more to pay the fines incurred.

Now, please note that, as I present this plan to you, I do so tongue in cheek. Despite my rationale, the flaws are obvious.

Only an idiot would seriously suggest such a remedy. But this is the sort of argument that Paul faced in his missionary journeys.

Now, Paul didn't have to worry about cars or speeding tickets as a revenue source for a city, but he heard this type rationale in relation to grace.

That's why Romans 6:15-23 made it into the letter he wrote to the church in Rome. Listen to what he said.

Romans 6:15-23, "What then? Shall we sin because we are not under the law but under grace? By no means! Don't you know that when you offer yourselves to someone as obedient slaves, you are slaves of the one you obey—whether you are slaves to sin, which leads to death, or to obedience, which leads to righteousness? But thanks be to God that, though you used to be slaves to sin, you have come to obey from your heart the pattern of teaching that has now claimed your allegiance. You have been set free from sin and have become slaves to righteousness. I am using an example from everyday life because of your human limitations. Just as you used to offer yourselves as slaves to impurity and to ever-increasing wickedness, so now offer yourselves as slaves to righteousness leading to holiness. When you were slaves to sin, you were free from the control of righteousness. What benefit did you reap at that time from the things you are now ashamed of? Those things result in death! But now that you have been set free from sin and have become slaves of God, the benefit you reap leads to holiness, and the result is eternal life.

For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in[b] Christ Jesus our Lord.”

Paul wrote this letter to the church in Rome to introduce himself and the gospel he was commissioned to preach. So, as he lays out his theology, he begins with the universal problem of mankind – sin.

None of us escape it. We all fall prey to its infection. We're born perverse and bent little creatures inclined to rage against the mention of dependency upon a Creator.

We want to be self-made, self-assured, and self-reliant. We'd rather worship animals, the stars, the sun, and especially ourselves rather than God.

We stifle the truth by suffocating it in layers of self-deceit and wishful thinking that there is no God. In other words, we claim ignorance.

So much so, that we miss the countless expressions of God's presence and glory in the world around us.

Paul makes it clear that we all have this problem. He tells us what God did when we were helpless to do anything for ourselves. He sent his Son.

When the time was ripe, Jesus Christ came in human flesh and lived the kind of life God intended man to live. And then, He traded His sinless life for our sinful one on the cross.

Just as death entered into the world through the disobedience of one man, so, through Christ's obedience, the many are brought to life.

Slide 2

The question then becomes, since through a tremendous act of grace we were given eternal life through Christ, how do we now live?

We didn't deserve what Jesus did for us and since we can't earn it, does it really matter how we live?

If God's glory is revealed through the grace He's shown in Jesus, doesn't greater sin lead to greater grace and so the greater glory?

That's the question Paul addresses in chapter 6 – How do we now live? As Christians, we often have difficulty answering this question.

There seems to be so many degrees and variations of faithfulness that we find ourselves with that deer-in-the-headlights look when we think about what our faith means for everyday life.

We normally end up reducing how our life expresses our faith down to a list of dos and don'ts. For example, as Christians, so we go to church on Sundays.

As Christians we only go to movies rated PG or lower, and we spend at least an hour in prayer every morning. We don't lie, cheat or steal. We don't cuss and we don't dance.

The problem with this approach is that it subjects us to a form of legalism. We buy into the lie that we're righteous people because of what we do, not who we are.

When we try to do all the right things to be righteous, we become a slave to the law, becoming out of tune with grace. So, how do we live in the light of this tremendous grace that God has shown us in Christ?

In Romans 6:19, Paul answers, *"I am using an example from everyday life because of your human limitations. Just as you used to offer yourselves as slaves to impurity and to ever-increasing wickedness, so now offer yourselves as slaves to righteousness leading to holiness."*

There are two images at work in this passage that need to be understood.

The first image, because it's the most obvious, is slavery. We don't like to talk about slavery in the United States because it nearly destroyed our union and degraded our fellow man.

The wounds of slavery upon the soul of America are still tender. It's an image we'd prefer to avoid altogether. But in Paul's day it was common; so common that it could be used to illustrate a good cause.

When a person is enslaved, his/her life is controlled by the one who owns him. But the second image is what makes this passage.

It is a faith image, an image drawn from worship in the temple. An image of an offering.

Slide 3

Now, let's jam these two things together to see what Paul's saying.

Paul's answer to the "dos and don'ts" approach is to offer our bodies, our lives, our energies, and our talents as an act of devotion and gratitude to the control of righteousness.

In other words, we're to voluntarily and willfully submit our bodies to righteous desires and actions in the same way that we voluntarily and willingly submitted our bodies to all the appetites and stimulations of sin.

But... what are righteous desires and actions? First, let me warn you, be careful here because it is easy to formulate a "do's and don'ts" list at this point.

Probably, a better approach is to define "righteousness."

“Righteousness,” in the sense that Paul uses it here, isn’t a reference to moral purity or achievement but speaks to God’s saving action in Jesus Christ rather than to our keeping the Ten Commandments.

Remember, Paul argues in Romans 3 and 4 that righteousness cannot come by the Law because we can’t keep all of it perfectly.

When any part of the Law is broken, the whole covenant is shattered. So, righteousness cannot come through the Law.

But God, Who’s faithful to His covenant, redeemed us through Christ. God satisfied His own divine justice through Christ, and so secured the covenant against violation.

We, being weak and unable to keep the law, are now, through the price Jesus paid, enabled to keep God’s covenant and draw near to Him, even with our imperfections.

Because of Jesus, we’re declared righteous or more simply put, we’re put in a right relationship with God. The relationship we were intended to have; the one for which we were born.

Our relationship to God is fully restored through Christ. By virtue of that relationship, we’re declared righteous.

So, offering ourselves as slaves to righteousness, as Paul says, is to live faithfully in that right relationship with God the way He intended us to live.

Not because it’s the Law, but as Christians it’s now our nature to do so. We’re new creatures in Christ. The old has passed and the new is come. We are to live a life that’s consistent with who we are in Christ Jesus.

When we live a life that's consistent with who we are, by abandoning old habits and vices in favor of a life marked by gratitude and praise, the result of that life is holiness.

Slide 4

Now, one criticism that's dogged many ministers is that people tend to accuse them of being "holier than thou." When I hear that phrase, I'm not even sure I understood what's being said.

I understand why people might say this about me because I always think I'm right.

But being told I'm "holier" than someone else bothers me since it tells me the person calling me "holier" has no idea what it means to be holy.

Most people hate to be thought of as holy. In our opinion, holy people, or at least those who think they are holy, are perfectionists. They're out to judge the world against their impossible standards.

It's a "Catch 22" thing. Those who think they're holy are just knuckleheads who're overwhelmed with their own self-importance. The form of their religion is great, but the heart of their religion is pride.

Really holy people don't know they're holy. It's as if holiness sneaks up on them and covers them like some mysterious shroud.

Today, holiness has this bizarre undertone of arrogance; of someone who thinks they're better than everyone else. That's why no one wants to be thought of as holy.

And we certainly don't want to appear "too holy." That would mean that we're out of touch with reality.

That we've somehow slipped into this frame of mind where we just don't get the real world anymore. We become too spiritual.

Now, let's stop for a minute and think about what's being said here. Too holy. Too spiritual.

Do you see what we're setting ourselves up for? The lie we're about to buy into? Why does being too holy or too spiritual scare us? I'll tell you why.

We're afraid of the world seeing us for who we really are – a holy people, a nation of priests.

We're afraid of being separated from the rest of the world, of being singled out because of our faith.

Most people feel it's better to be a wall flower Christian than to endure the withering glare of those who're threatened by our testimony.

That's right, the testimony of a holy life threatens the unbelieving, and the one who marginally believes, because it forces them to face the truth. That God's real and has a claim on their lives.

So, what are we talking about when we talk about holiness? What does it mean to be holy? This is what we're going to be discussing over the next couple of weeks.

Hebrews 12:14b tells us that “...*without holiness no one will see the Lord.*” So, one thing is certain, holiness is not passé.

It's a timeless pursuit, contemporary in every age and the vocation of every Christian. We are to be holy as God is holy.

Slide 5

Conclusion

Let's close this morning with just a quick definition of holiness.

J.I. Packer, in his book *Rediscovering Holiness*, defines holiness as being “*separated and set apart for God, consecrated and made over for him. In its application to people, God’s ‘holy ones’ or saints, the word implies both devotion and assimilation: devotion in the sense of living a life of service to God; assimilation, in the sense of imitating, conforming to, and becoming like the God one serves.*”

In other words, holiness is bringing our lives into conformity with what we already are as a child of God.

You may not know it, but your life in Christ has a very specific goal – to be conformed to image of Christ.

All our experiences, good and bad, are used by God to shape us, to mold us into the image of His Son, so that our character and heart look like His character and heart.

Holiness is not some otherworldly, spiritual weirdness; it’s the goal of our salvation. It’s what we are in Christ, and who we are striving to become in Christ.