

# Holiness: My struggles and My Joy

## **Introduction:**

With this sermon, we will continue with the series “things I learned the hard way/wished I had known sooner”

The Scriptures have always had a special place in my heart. I remember as a child who had just learned to read, one of the first books that I wanted to read on my own was the Bible. Of course it helps when you grow up as a pastor’s child. The Bible was always important in our daily lives. I was then and still am very interested in the Bible. And I take it seriously. Over the years I have felt that God has spoken to me through the Bible.

## **My Struggle**

I grew up in a Christian tradition that holds in high esteem what we called “the doctrine of Holiness”. As I continued to grow I started to observe and pay attention to what some of my Bible teachers were teaching and comparing that with what the Bible says and how it worked in practice. I started struggling with the doctrine of Holiness as

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“second work of Grace” and how it was illustrated to me.

According to the illustrations, the Holy Spirit eradicates the sinful nature when it comes to your heart and sanctifies you. It is comparable to uprooting a tree. Once the roots are gone, the tree is no more.

One of the things expected from Christians was the pursuit of Holiness, which is Biblical (Hebrews 12:14: 14 “Follow peace with all men, and holiness, without which no man shall see the Lord” (KJB)). Pursue it with such an ardor, that sooner or later, (better if sooner) the Holy Spirit, in a dramatic, highly emotional interaction with the believer, the Holy Spirit sanctifies the believer. After that a sinless life is expected.

The problem was that in practice, in my observation, it didn't quite work the way it was expected to work. In practice, to have received entire sanctification meant to come to accept certain standards of conduct and a dress code, which was addressed mainly to women. And there were some

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standards for men, but nothing as radical as the standards for women.

## **High Anxiety:**

At least for me, this created an environment of high anxiety. On the one hand you want to please the Lord and live holy lives. After all, we are called to live holy lives before the Lord. But on the other hand, the bar is so high, that it is impossible and frustrating to reach it. Just imagine stating – in a mountain top spiritual experience – that you have been entirely sanctified then later having some sinful thoughts, desires and temptations. Whatever happened to the uprooting or eradication of the sinful nature? So, the Holy Spirit didn't do what I thought he did and I am lost, condemned, unable to live according to the will of God.

Some of us would turn inward and close ourselves to the world and hide our struggles with sin. And if and when we sinned, the tendency was to hide the perceived sin. Thus presenting a façade. It was hard when I was faced with this dilemma, if one believed that the doctrine of sanctification is true as

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illustrated or as taught, then you either lied when you testified that you were sanctified or the doctrine was not correct.

Still, I wanted holiness. I needed holiness. God calls us to be Holy. Although I eventually rejected this idea, I still want to live a holy life before the Lord. and the search and the questions continued.

So, what does it mean to live holy? Do we care? I think we should. But the idea of being holy makes us uncomfortable. Only God is holy, right? Isn't it arrogant to claim to be holy?

We read the passages in Matthew and Peter. The passage in Matthew is in the middle of the Sermon of the Mountain, where Jesus delineates the thinking that goes into the new the living in a covenant relationship with God in Jesus in the kingdom of heaven.

## **The Sermon on the Mountain**

Jesus begins his sermon with the beatitudes:  
(What is a blessing in the Kingdom of Heaven?)

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“blessed the poor in Spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven, blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness for they will be filled, blessed the merciful for they will receive mercy, blessed are the peacemakers for they will be children of God. And then he starts to delineate some commandments that went well beyond the letter of the law and addressed the issues in the heart.

The “be perfect as your heavenly father is perfect” comes at the end of the section where he says, “You have heard that it was said, “you shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy. But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven”

Loving your friends is still there, but it goes beyond loving those who are our friends, those who love us. It talks about loving your enemies and those who persecute you. And we have to remember that this “commandment” comes in the context of persecution. For the early disciples this would not be just a high ideal. It would be a real life experience.

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This kind of radical love is sort of the way God has loved us and it does reflect the character of God. God models his character to us and obedience is not just an ideal but it is nitty-gritty obedience. Plain and simple. Our call is to love in a radical way that comes from the heart.

As a scholar states, “In Jewish texts, individual believers can be designated as perfect because of their piety and their obedience, e.g.Noah or Abraham” (Luz 1985, 346) “The conformity to the character of God, to which Israel was called in their role as God’s special people ...is now affirmed as the goal of the disciples of Jesus...It is an ideal set before all the disciples, **not a special status** of those who claim to have achieved “**sinless perfection**” in this life” (France 1985, 130). So, perfection has more to do with obedience than ideas of the eradication of sinful nature.

Although, according to the sermon of the mountain, it does include more than mechanical obedience. It has to do with an obedience that is born in the heart that conforms to the character and heart of God. This kind of radical love is hard to

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fathom but it does reveal the heart and the love of God as revealed in his Son Jesus. And we can take comfort that God loves you and me with such a radical love in Jesus.

## Jesus

I am so grateful to God for his Son Jesus. It is Jesus who has shown us who God is. If we know Jesus, we know God. And thank God for that. We don't really have much guess work as far as a life well lived before God. Jesus is our example. Jesus is the one who with his life showed us the character of God in ways that we can understand. It is because of him that we have hope.

Peter writes, "... prepare your minds for action; discipline yourselves; set all your hope on the grace that Jesus Christ will bring you when he is revealed. Like obedient children, do not be conformed to the desires that you formerly had in ignorance. Instead, as he who called you is holy, be holy yourselves in all your conduct; for it is written, "you shall be holy, for I am holy"

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We look forward to the future and this hope orients us towards a future with God. We prepare our minds. One thing to remember is that these letters, the New Testament was written in a context of persecution. Like the early church, we are to live in hope for the future in challenging times. We are living in challenging times. But in all this our hope must be in God and in Christ's final revelation. And in the present ask ourselves, how did Jesus act in the midst of persecution? Did he love his enemies? Yes, he did.

He loved his disciples and he loved the multitudes but he also showed love and consideration for his enemies. Jesus had tough arguments with those who hated him, but he loved all. Jesus prayed for those who crucified and mocked him, "Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing" He said (Luke 23:34b NRSV).

We are called to live in obedience and nonconforming to the ways of the world. Or not to be conformed to the desires that we would conform to if our hearts were not of God and didn't reflect the character of God.

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## **The Holy Spirit**

The disciples, Matthew and Peter witnessed the life of Jesus. And once Jesus ascended to the Father, the Holy Spirit was poured out on the church.

Today, we have the Holy Spirit. A holy life is not possible without the inner work of the Holy Spirit. But I think that holiness has less to do with achieving dramatic and sometimes mystical and emotional interaction with the Holy Spirit –d more with obedience in the nitty gritty, daily, boring, tiring routine of our daily lives.

But it is uncomfortable and awkward to think in terms of living holy lives. So, let us not think in those terms. Let us simply live in obedience in the daily grind of our lives.

Empowered by the Holy Spirit we can. In Acts 1:8 Luke writes, that in response to the disciples' question about the time when the Kingdom of Israel would be restored, Jesus said to them, "It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority. But you will receive power

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when the Holy Spirit has come upon you;... and after that... you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth” (Acts 1:7-8 NRSV). Once the Holy Spirit was poured out on the disciples, they understood and proclaimed Christ with more power and courage.

We are unable to understand Scriptures without the help of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit guides us to all truth. We cannot appropriate and internalize Scriptures without the Holy Spirit.

When the commandments of Jesus, when the life of Jesus, his teachings, his example, his suffering, death and resurrection are internalized in our heart then we can live our lives according to the heart of God. In that sense we become holy in our way of living. But when we do, we would probably not even know it.

And of course there is something especial about knowing God and living according to his heart, but I believe it has to do more with practice what we know than with mystical and sublime feelings. Are we able to love those who do wrong to us?

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## **A relationship with God**

I guess the important thing is that a holy life is in fact a relationship with God.

This relationship is characterized by our devotion to God and our desire to live according to his commandments. And there is no guess work I believe. The daily and constant study of the Scriptures gives us the knowledge needed to know God with our minds and the Holy Spirit working in us help us to understand the Scriptures and to understand God.

A starting point for me is in the knowledge that God loves me, that God loves us. God loves you and me. John 3:16 “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.” (NRSV) and Romans 5:8, “8 But God shows his love for us in that while we were yet sinners Christ died for us” (NRSV).

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So, like Israel's call to a covenant relationship with God, God calls to a relationship with him. And this relationship is based on God's initiative and love for us.

And I find so much comfort in the words written in Peter 1:3-4a: "3 Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! By his great mercy we have been born anew to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and to an inheritance which is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you," (NRSV).

Notice, it is by the great mercy of God that we have been born anew to a living hope. This hope is not a dead hope for it is based on the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Christ is alive now. And it is in Jesus, the corner stone chosen by God, but sadly rejected by humanity, that we are as Peter 2:9-10, says, "„,you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people,[a] that you may declare the wonderful deeds of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light. Once you were no people but now you are God's people; once you had

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not received mercy but now you have received mercy.”

## **Community**

This call here is to a community that is build up on Jesus Christ. It is in this community that we find what it means to be God’s own people. The world has largely rejected Jesus Christ, the corner stone that makes the community of God’s people possible.

A holy life is lived out in community. This was true for Israel and it is true for the church. It is not individualistic experience, rather it is again, a community experience.

Bible interpretation is safer in community. In fact, I believe it’s dangerous when Bible interpretation and theologies flow from an individual from outside toward the community. We must strive as a community to interpret the Bible together and let it shape us, under the guidance and power of the Holy Spirit.

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I think that one of the problems of the idea of sanctification as the eradication of the sinful nature is that it doesn't take in consideration or if it does, it minimizes the importance of living in a covenantal relationship with God and with God's people and prioritizes and isolates the individual over the community of faith. Perhaps the idea sounds better in theory than in practice.

In practice it places a tremendous pressure on the individual to perform and to always have the right outward appearance. How can one say that the Holy Spirit eradicated your sinful nature and then find yourself tempted by the ways of the world and still be authentic in our interactions with God's people?

The Bible does teach us about the work of apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers. Here the role of those individuals gifted to the church is to equip the saints for service and the building up of the body of Christ. The purpose of these gifts is the unity of faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, help the church to mature, to the

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measure of the full stature of Christ (Ephesians 4:11-13).

All this to say that our call is to be lived out in community and not individualistically.

And as we go, we make disciples. We teach the new disciples the things that we have learned from Jesus and to obey him. As these new disciples start living out the new life in Christ, they also begin to reflect the character of God as we also continue to be lifelong disciples of Jesus Christ. This we do in community.

In community we learn to relate to God and to one another. Some people claim that they can be followers of Jesus without being part of the people of God in practical ways. I don't believe that is possible. Holiness is to be lived out in relationship with God, with neighbor and with ourselves.

Some people claim to love God but hate the church. Even though sometimes some churches have failed to live up to its claim it doesn't mean that ALL churches, ALL the time have failed. The argument can be made that in spite of our failures,

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the church has been a force for good whenever it has sought to live up to the character of God. It is in the community of faith, the church, that we can better reflect the character of God.

Things that help us to live out our call in community are things such as worshipping together, praying together, studying and struggling with the Scriptures together, serving those in need together. And when it comes to serve those in need, when we do serve them together, we are indeed, I believe, living according to the character of God.

We all have our ways of relating to the community. We don't have to be a uniformed community. I believe that the strength of a community of faith is in its diversity. Diversity of gifts, personalities, capacities, education, ethnicity and culture.

Holiness is to live our lives according to the character of God, in spite our own personal and community failures. Holiness is not giving up but strive more and more, day after day to know God e. Our foundation, inspiration and example is our Lord

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Jesus. We claim that he is our LORD and Savior, and the Holy Spirit opens the eyes of our hearts and minds to the love of God for us.

## **My joy**

The Scriptures have always been a source of joy to me. Knowing God and knowing that he loves me has giving me joy that has endured for all these years that the Lord has given me.

In the end perhaps my early struggles with the idea of holiness as I originally understood was a good thing. I don't have to agree with everything a church teaches, I can argue sometimes, but one thing I can say, is that even as I asked questions then, I was never shunned or rejected there. If anything, I can say that my mother church still loves me very much and that I love that church very much as well.

I know that we can look forward and serve God and our neighbor together even now. Unity in the essentials, love in our differences. Perhaps, looking at the greater picture, that is what holiness would

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look like in the eyes of God, perhaps, just perhaps. In fact, throughout the history of the church there have been disagreements, sometimes bitter disagreements. But in all this the church has persevered and not only persevered but thrived.

### **No anxiety**

God has always loved me. I don't have to depend on a mystical, mysterious, unexplainable event in sanctification. I know my Lord and Savior and he knows me as well. He loves me and I love him.

Sometime ago I was reading a book by Peter Wilcox, in his concluding thoughts of his book "Living the dreams: "Holiness comes less through the dramatic experiences of God's Spirit, than through the faithful endurance of trials. We grow in likeness to God just by pressing on, day after day, in the ordinary and unglamorous demands of life. In obedience and love"

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I agree with that statement. Holiness is found more in the doing than in the mystical, mysterious supposed eradication of the sinful nature.

That gives me peace and joy. I will not worry about being holy. I will continue to do what I have always done: pursue my long life desire of knowing God since he has loved me before I knew that such a love was even possible and act more and more in the likeness of His character.

## **Conclusion**

### **Renew or restate commitments**

And together, in community,

I will continue to study the Scriptures.

I will continue to grow in my knowledge of God as revealed in the Scriptures in Jesus Christ and guided by the Holy Spirit.

I will continue to pray.

I will continue to love God, neighbor and self

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I will continue to belong to the community of faith.

I will continue to worship the Lord in community.

I will continue to be accountable to the body of Christ.

The rest is God's work in us.