

## **“Becoming Like Jesus the Holy One, Together” | Ephesians 4:17-24 (Becoming Like the Real Jesus Together)**

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During a spiritual revival in 1839, Scottish pastor Robert Murray M'Cheyne found his church filled to the brim—sometimes seven days a week. A man curious as to the secret of M'Cheyne's ministry asked him, “Sir, what do your people need most from you?” M'Cheyne replied, “What my people need from me most, is my personal holiness.”

M'Cheyne would die just three years later, at the age of twenty-nine. He is remembered globally as a man of unusual godliness and personal piety. He was holy.

It is to this quality of holiness that I want to draw our attention. The content of our interest in holiness is our September series, *Becoming Like the Real Jesus, Together*. Jesus is the revelation of true humanness—the rest of us have fallen short. What do we see about humanness when we look at Jesus?

Thus far we have seen that by his sonship, Jesus tells us that to be human is to come from God, belonging to God as his son or daughter. Last week we saw that by Jesus' servanthood, we see that our purpose—the essence of our vocation—is to serve God, doing his Will here on earth.

This week we turn to Jesus' title as “the Holy One of God,” which Peter calls him: “we have believed, and have come to know, that you are the **Holy One** of God” (Jn 6:69). And to the subsequent call that we, too, be holy: “to be Holy as He is Holy” (Lev 20:26, 1 Pet 1:14-15).

If sonship and servanthood raised questions about human identity and purpose, considering Jesus' holiness brings us to the matter of *character*: what *type* of person are you? What type of person are you becoming?

We may excel in career development, or in working on our physical or mental health. But do we know how to develop a profound character? More to the point: even if we do strive for character's marked by goodness or kindness, do we have any idea what it would entail to have a character marked by *holiness*?

With these questions in mind, consider Ephesians 4, where Paul reminds us that the Christian has become a new type of human, and must regularly put on this new human. Paul reminds his readers

to put off your old self, which belongs to your former manner of life and is corrupt through deceitful desires, <sup>23</sup> and to be renewed in the spirit of your minds, <sup>24</sup> and to put on the

new self, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness. (Eph 4:22-24).

The final term used to describe the new self is “holiness.” With this as a starting point, we will organize the rest of our time around three questions: **(1) What is holiness? (2) How do we grow in holiness? (3) What are the effects of holiness?**

## I. What Is Holiness

For some, holiness can seem a bland idea—calling to mind religious ceremonies or a tedious morality. In contrast, as C. S. Lewis quipped, “How little people know who think that holiness is dull. When one meets the real thing, it is irresistible.”

God Is Holy:

The Bible begins its description of holiness with God.

Only once in all of Scripture is an attribute of God stated three times in a row. “Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God Almighty” is what Isaiah hears sung in God’s throne room (Isa 6:3). John the Apostle hears the same in Revelation: “Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God Almighty” (Rev 4:8). God is never described as “love, love, love,” though He is a God of steadfast love. God is never described as “grace, grace, grace,” though we sinners need grace desperately. Holy seems to describe, more than other attribute, God’s very essence.

The root of the word “holy” probably means “cut” or “separated.” In the case of God, we get the idea of a being who is wholly-other, totally unique and completely superior to everything else. He is eternal; everything else is created; He is all-powerful, all-knowing. He is morally perfect, never tainted by sin. He has no rival:

There is none holy like the LORD: for there is none besides you (1 Sam 2:2).

People Are Holy, Derivatively:

When people or things are holy in the Bible they are so only in relation to God—in a derivative sense. They are holy when they are *separated* from sin and sinful use, and *set apart* for God’s use. People and things (like the Temple) are holy in the Bible in association with God’s presence. God is holy; other things may share in his holiness by closeness to him.

More than morality:

And to underscore that God’s holiness is more than morality, we might note how the song Isaiah hears would ring differently if instead of “holy, holy, holy,” the angels sang “moral, moral, moral.” There is more to holiness than bland rules. Notice four qualities associated with God’s holiness in Scripture:

Holiness has aesthetics qualities—it is glorious and beautiful. The Lord is “majestic in holiness” (Exod 15:11); his holiness “fills the earth with glory” (Isa 6:3); we are to “worship the Lord is the splendor of holiness” (1 Cor 16:29).

Holiness has a hygienic quality, associated with purity and cleanness: Levitical priest has to bath their bodies before putting their holy garments on (Lev 16:4<sup>1</sup>); to be unholy was to be unclean, and unhealthy.

Holiness has power, force: God appears to Moses as fire in the burning bush, and Moses must “remove his sandals, for the place on which you are standing is holy....and Moses hides his face, for he was afraid to look at God” (Exod 3:5, 6). God’s holiness is a force that threatens sin the way light threatens darkness.

And holiness has an ethical outworking, it is not less than morality—it expresses itself by putting things to rights: “The Holy God shows himself holy in righteousness” (Isa 5:16).

If God’s holiness were likened to the Sun, his essence of holiness would be like the fire that makes up the heart of the sun; his glory would be like the light emanating from the sun, and his work to cleanse from sin and bring life like the warmth from the suns raise. Glory, cleansings, righteousness—these are all emanations of God’s holiness.

Let us ask now, how sinners who have become unholy, can become holy again. To do so, we consider the flow of thought of Eph 4:22-24.

## **II. Becoming Holy**

The process of becoming holy is described in the movements of “putting off the old self” and “putting on the new self;” perhaps calling to mind undressing and putting on new clothes for baptism. Holiness requires putting off and putting on.

### **(1) Put Off**

As mentioned earlier, the root of the Hebrew word for holy means “cut,” and this carries a sense of being “separated.” To be holy, is to separate from that which is unholy—both in ourselves and in our world. This idea of separating from sin is found in verse 22, where Paul reminds his readers,

to put off your old self, which belongs to your former manner of life and is corrupt through deceitful desires (Eph 4:22).

Positional Holiness:

The first putting off of sin must be when we put on sin off, and onto Christ. He suffers the penalty for our unholiness and by doing so spiritually cleanses us:

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<sup>1</sup> E.g., Lev. 16:4 He shall put on the holy linen coat and shall have the linen undergarment on his body, and he shall tie the linen sash around his waist, and wear the linen turban; these are the holy garments. He shall bathe his body in water and then put them on.

So Jesus also suffered outside the gate in order to make holy the people through his own blood (Heb 13:12).

And this makes us holy, in terms of our acceptance by God and our destiny. We are “saints,” which means holy ones.

Progressive Holiness:

However, in this present time, we are still afflicted by sin within and without. We are called, therefore, to live up to, and into, our identity as saints. This involves *sanctification* (which comes from the same word as saint, and means “to become holy”). We are in progress.

And we do not work from a blank or neutral slate: we have to put off old habits, old ways of thinking, negative attitudes—all of which are unholy and dehumanizing.

to do this, you need to first recognize the old man. Are you aware of your unholy tendencies and character traits? Are you bent toward pride, lust, anger, resentment? Do you feed this part of you?

Once we recognize the old self, we must starve him: “deny yourself and follow me,” says Jesus. “Put to death what is earthly in you: sexual immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and covetousness,” says Paul (Col 3:5-6). Martin Lloyd-Jones says of the old self:

Do not feed him! If you know that reading a certain type of literature gets you down, stop reading it! Starve the old man, strangle him, be violent with him, *mortify*, says the Apostle. And mortify means mortify; you hit him, you pummel him you throttle him, in order to get rid of him.”<sup>2</sup>

Starve the old man!

## **(2) Put On**

Just as Christians can make the mistake of thinking the faith is only ease, we also can make the mistake of thinking it is only negative—all harsh self-denial. But this is not so. Along with putting off the old, Paul says we are to put on the new. Verse 24:

Put on the new self, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness.(v. 24).

Notice the word “created” here, and “after the likeness of God.” This calls to mind the creation of humankind in Genesis 1, and tells us that what has happened to the Christian is as indignant as that first act of Creation.

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<sup>2</sup> Martin Lloyd-Jones, *Darkness and Light: An Exposition of Ephesians 4:17-5:17* (Baker Books, 1982), 192.

If you are a Christian, even as you struggle with lingering sin, know that your identity and destiny have been permanently changed, and this by God. You are “a new creation” (2 Cor 5:17); and the God “who has begun a good work in you, will bring it to completion” (Phil 1.6).

#### New Mind-Set:

How do we cooperate with the grace of God in seeing this new self put on? Verse 23 is a clue: “be renewed in the spirit of your minds” (Eph 4:23). In scripture, mind is often akin to heart, and means on the whole our overall mindset or bent.

This is our core attitude, from which we do everything else. If it is off, so will be the rest of us—like when the gages of an airplane are off, even if the pilot operates his tools perfectly, he still will not fly straight. And the core attitude, the mindset, must be the fear of God. The Bible is clear, “the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom” (Prov 1.7).

Apply: closeness with God: And such a mindset is cultivated only through closeness with God—holiness is an intensely personal matter; me with God.

#### New Practices:

Along with a new mindset, we need to put on new practices. Spiritual nature abhors a vacuum. If we want to put off greed, we must put on generosity; if we want to put off gossip and slander, we work each day to be encouragers.

If we glance down at verse 25, we see that this putting off and putting on happens, for Paul, in the context of the new community, the church. It is no abstraction: “Therefore, having put away falsehood, let each one of you speak the truth with his neighbor, for we are members one of another” (Eph 4:25). The local church is both the school where holiness is taught and the practice field where holiness is learned.

You likely have a place in your home for undressing and dressing—where old clothes are put off, and new clothes are put on. Do you have a place where you do this spiritually? Perhaps you can think of the desk where you do your quiet time as your spiritual dressing room. As you read Scripture and pray, ask God to help you put off the old you, and put on the new you, created after the likeness of God, in true righteousness and holiness.

Finally, let us note two features of the Effect of holiness.

### III. The Effect of Holiness

#### Subtle Power:

Jesus’ impact on people often comes through the collective force of his character—who He is. And this shines forth often as he combined seemingly contradictory things: His power combined with his humility; His Words of truth combined with his presence among sinners; His passion for righteousness combined with this merciful forgiveness. He is a lion, and a lamb.

Holiness gives rise to this peculiar glory—a character, a quality of person, that the world cannot understand. And though it is often strange, it is ultimately alluring.

Holiness, in this sense, is the Russians call the “holy fool.” Someone who is so good, so innocent, that at times they appear naïve. Someone who is so trusting, they get taken advantage of. Someone who is so forgiving, they get taken advantage of again. Someone whose love is stronger than their lust; whose passion for the life of others is greater at times than their passion for their own success or survival.

Holiness, as expressed in a fallen world, has a subtle but real power to draw people. It is a strange fire, burning with honesty, purity, truth and love. People will say after being with a holy man or holy woman, as the travelers did on the road to Emmaus after breaking bread with Jesus, “did our hearts not burn within us” (Lk 24).

#### Solid Pleasure:

The roots of the English word “holy” refer to health and wholeness. There is a connection, at least in the history of the term, between being holy and being whole and healthy. And this is true spiritually.

The holy person is near unto God, and this means they are at peace with God. They are pure in heart, as therefore they see more of God (see Matt 5:8). They have laid their sins at His feet and are daily turning away from them. Therefore, they know something of a heavenly atmosphere in their soul; they breath cleaner air.

This may not at all change outer circumstances (suffering is often part of how God sanctifies us and makes us holy); but it will introduce into the soul a type of order, coherence, and solidity—a peace, a peace that comes from being at peace with God, that is beyond understanding.

In a world that tutors us to pursue happiness, the Christian is taught instead to pursue holiness. And the pursuit of holiness can happen in any and all circumstances—good times or hard times. And as it turns out, happiness—solid joy—is a byproduct of holiness. The soul close to God, knows a solid pleasure.

When, on March 25, 1843, Scottish pastor Robert Murry M’Cheyne died, he was just twenty-nine years old. His was as life spent for Jesus Christ—and spent in the presence of a holy God. When he passed, a note was found unopened, which had been sent to him while he was lying with fever. It read:

I hope you will pardon a stranger for addressing to you a few lines. I heard you preach last Sabbath evening, and it pleased God to bless that sermon to my soul. It was not so much what you said, as your manner of speaking that struck me. I saw in you a *beauty in holiness* that I never saw before.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Andrew Bonar, *Robert Murray M’Cheyne* (Edinburgh, UK: Banner of Truth Trust, 1997), 187.

Of the many things a human can strive for, happiness, success, accomplishments, physical health, the Christians is called, above all else, to pursue holiness. Holiness—our connection to the burning fire of God’s own nature. Holiness—the love and righteousness and truth and beauty of God, alive in the life of man. Such is what it means, to be human in the image of the Holy One, Jesus Christ.

#### Small Group Discussion Questions

1. What comes to mind when you hear the word “holy”? What would be your definition of “holy” or “holiness”?
2. Have you known people who are holy—godly, humble, passionate for being like Christ? If so, how has their presence impacted you?
3. Read Ephesians 4:22-24. What are two attributes of your “old self” that you’d like to put off?
4. Read Ephesians 4:22-24. What are two attributes of your “new self” that you can put on—practice—this week?