Be Holy

“but as he who called you is holy, you also be holy in all your conduct, since it is written, ‘You shall be holy, for I am holy.’” (1 Peter 1:15–16, ESV)

“Be holy.” Few commands in Scripture are more easily misunderstood. Peter did not invent these words. He reached back into Leviticus, where God repeatedly commanded Israel, “Be holy, for I am holy.” But what does it mean for God to be holy, and how can God command sinful human beings to be holy?

God's holiness is more than His separation from sin. God was holy before sin existed. Holiness belongs to His very being. He is absolutely unique, morally perfect, and utterly distinct from everything He has created. There is God, and there is everything that is not God. He belongs to no class and is measured by no standard outside Himself. God does not conform to holiness. God is holy.

When holiness is applied to man, however, it cannot mean that man becomes what God is. The Creator-creature distinction never disappears. For man to be holy means fundamentally to be set apart to God, to belong to Him, and consequently to live in a manner consistent with belonging to the Holy One. Holiness is not merely separation from certain activities. It is first separation unto God. Conduct follows ownership.

That distinction becomes especially important when we notice when God commanded Israel to be holy.

Israel was not standing in Egypt waiting to become sufficiently holy for God to redeem them. God delivered them first. He brought them out of slavery. He claimed them as His covenant people. Then, before giving the Ten Commandments, He declared, “I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery.” Exodus 20:2

The order matters.

God did not say, “Obey these commandments, and if you succeed, I will become your God.” He said, “I am the LORD your God.” Redemption came before obedience. Israel already belonged to God when He commanded His people to be holy. Their obedience was not the price of belonging to Him. It was the appropriate response of those who already did.

Peter follows the same pattern. He addresses people whom God has chosen, caused to be born again, given a living hope, redeemed by the precious blood of Christ, and promised an imperishable inheritance. Only then does Peter say, “Be holy.” And he makes the scope unmistakable: “in all your conduct.” Holiness reaches into ordinary life because every part of life now belongs to God.

The command is not an invitation to earn acceptance with God. It is a command to live according to the reality God has already established.

This is why Leviticus contains a remarkable statement: “Consecrate yourselves, therefore, and be holy, for I am the LORD your God. Keep my statutes and do them; I am the LORD who sanctifies you.” Leviticus 20:7–8

God commands His people to be holy and then declares that He is the One who sanctifies them. Human obedience is real and necessary, but it never becomes independent human achievement. God commands the holiness that God Himself produces.

Christian holiness, therefore, is neither a means of gaining salvation nor an attempt to persuade God to continue accepting us. It is the life appropriate to people who have been redeemed, set apart, and claimed by God as His own.

The gospel does not say, “Become holy so that you may belong to God.”

It says something far more wonderful.

You belong to God. Therefore, live like someone who does.

Be holy.

Just a thought.

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