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God's Law In New Testament Ethical Themes

(Part II)

by Greg L. Bahnsen, Th.M., Ph.D.

Holiness and Sainthood

A biblical concept closely related to that of righteousness is the concept of holiness. While the former emphasizes a just and upright conformity with a standard of moral perfection, the latter lays stress on utter separation from all moral impurity. However the norm for both is the same in Scripture. An unrighteous man cannot be deemed holy, and an unholy person will not be seen as righteous.

Above all God is "the Holy One" (1 John 2:20; as applied to Christ, Mark 1:24; John 6:69; Acts 3:14; Rev. 3:7). When He saves us and draws us to Himself, He makes us holy -- that is, "sanctifies" us -- as well. We were chosen in Christ before the foundation of the world "in order that we should be holy and without blemish" (Eph. 1:4); from the beginning God chose us to be saved in believing the truth and in holiness (sanctification) produced by the Holy Spirit (2 Thes. 2:13). By His own sacrifice and the work of reconciliation accomplished by His death (Heb. 10:14; Col. 1:22), Christ sanctifies the church, aiming to present it as holy and without blemish before God (Eph. 5:26-27). It is God who makes us holy (1 Thes. 5:23), especially through the ministry of the Holy Spirit in us (1 Peter 1:2).

Holiness is thus an important ethical theme in the New Testament. Believers are called by God precisely to "be holy ones" -- that is "saints" (Rem. 1:7; 1 Cor. 1:2). Christians in a particular locality or church are customarily designated God's "saints" (Acts 9:13, 32; Rem. 15:25; 2 Cor. 1:1; Phil. 4:22); these holy ones are those for whom the Holy Spirit makes intercession (Rem. 8:27), to whom God makes known His mysteries (Col. 1:26), and for whom we are to show acts of love (Col. 1:4; Rem. 12:13; Heb. 6:10; 1 Tim. 5:10). They have been chosen, redeemed, and called to be "sanctified," which is to say set apart, consecrated to God's service, or holy before Him. The inclusion of the Gentiles in God's redemptive kingdom means that they have become "fellow-citizens with the saints" (Eph. 2:19) in the "commonwealth of

Israel" (2:12). Accordingly the church is made up of those sanctified in Christ Jesus and called to be holy ones or "saints" (1 Cor. 1:2). Christians are "holy brothers" (Heb. 3:1), a "holy temple of God" (1 Cor. 3:17; Eph. 2:21), purged vessels of honor "made holy for the Master's use" and ready for every good work (2 Tim. 2:12).

Any conception of New Testament ethics which skirts holiness or encourages anything contrary to it is in diametric opposition to the text of God's word. Holiness of life is an inescapable requirement of God's people. They must present their bodies as holy sacrifices (Rem. 12:1) and their members as servants of righteousness unto sanctification or holiness (Rem. 6:19). God has called them to holiness rather than uncleanness (1 Thes. 4:7) and freed them from sin so that they might produce the fruit of holiness (Rem. 6:22). As believers we must establish our hearts unblamable in holiness before God (1 Thes. 3:13) and see to it that our behavior in the world is in holiness (2 Cor. 1:12). Everywhere we turn in the New Testament, the ethical theme of holiness keeps reappearing; its demand is constant. Paul's stirring exhortation summarizes this demand well: "let us cleanse ourselves from all defilement of flesh and spirit, perfecting holiness in the fear of God" (2 Cor. 7:1).

What is the character of this holiness which the New Testament takes as a pervasive moral theme? By what standard is holiness measured and where is concrete guidance in holiness found? The fact that Christians are to be holy is so often stated in the New Testament that we must certainly assume that the norm or criterion of holiness was already well known; little needs to be said to explain to New Testament readers what this holiness requires. The suggestion is unavoidable that the Old Testament standards of morality already sufficiently defined the holiness which God sought in His people. Hebrews 12:10 indicates that God chastens us so that we may become "partakers of His holiness," and thus New Testament holiness is nothing less than a reflection of

God's character on a creaturely level. How does one who is a sinner in thought, word, and deed come to know what God's holiness requires of him? Peter makes it clear what is implicit in the pervasive New Testament theme of holiness when he writes: "even as He who called you is holy, be yourselves also holy in all manner of living; because it stands written, 'You shall be holy, for I am holy' " (1 Peter 1:15-16). Here Peter quotes the Old Testament law from such places as Leviticus 11:44-45; 19:2, and 20:7, where it is evident that God's people would be sanctified and be holy by following all the statutes of God's revealed law. Christ was surely including the Old Testament in His reference, when He prayed that His people would be sanctified by the word, of truth (John 17:17). Indeed, Paul explicitly says that the Old Testament law is our standard of holiness today even as it was for the saints of Israel: "So then the law is holy, and the commandment holy, and righteous, and good" (Rom. 7:12). In the book of Revelation John leaves no doubt about the place of God's law in the holiness of God's people. He defines the "saints" (holy ones) precisely as "the ones keeping the commandments of God and the faith of Jesus" (14:12; cf. 12: 17). In the moral theology of Jesus, Peter, Paul, and John the concept of holiness explicitly conforms to the law of God found in the Old Testament word of truth. We therefore see again that New Testament ethics cannot be pitted against God's law without doing damage to a central theme of the New Testament scriptures.

Separation from the World

Another ethical theme in the New Testament, one which is closely allied with that of holiness (i.e., "separation" unto God and away from defilement), is the theme of separation from the world. Of course, this does not denote a desire to withdraw from the affairs of life or the community of men. Christ made this abundantly clear in praying for us in this fashion: "I do not pray that you should take them out of the world, but that you should keep them from evil (or the evil one)" (John 17:15). When the New Testament speaks of separation from the world, the term "world" is used for the unethical state of sinful rebellion against God. The "course of this world" is Satanic and makes one a disobedient child of wrath (Eph. 2:2-3). "Friendship with the world is enmity with God," says James (4:4), and therefore true religion is "to keep oneself unspotted from the world" (1:27). The "world" is understood as the locus of corruption and defilement (2 Peter 1:4; 2:20). John puts it dramatically and clearly when he says, "the whole world lies in the evil one" (1 John 5:19) -- even as his gospel continually shows that "the world" is understood as the domain of disobedience, disbelief, and ethical darkness (John 1:29; 3:17, 19; 4:42; 6:33, 51; 8:12; 9:5; 12:46, 47; 16:8). John says elsewhere that "all that is in the world" is "the lust of the flesh and the lust of the eye and the vainglory of life" (1 John 2:15-17).

Hebrews 12:14 exhorts us to "follow after... the sanc-

tification without which no man shall see the Lord," indicating that those who are acceptable to God must be "set apart" (sanctified) unto Him and "separated" from the sinful pollution of the world. This entails cleansing from defilement (2 Cor. 7:1), leading a spotless life (2 Peter 3:14) -- all language reminiscent of the purity and sacrificial laws of the Old Testament. 2 Timothy 2:19 summarizes the New Testament theme of separation from the world: "Let every one that names the name of the Lord depart from unrighteousness."

How is this to be done however? What is the nature of such separation from unrighteousness and defilement? By what standard does the New Testament Christian separate himself from "the world"? James instructs us that the word of God -- which for James surely included the Old Testament scriptures of his day -- is the key to this ethical separation: "putting away all filthiness and overflowing of wickedness, receive with meekness the implanted word, which is able to save your souls. But be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deluding your own selves" (1:21-22). We can put away worldly vice and corruption by doing what is stipulated in the word of God, including the stipulations of the Old Testament and its law: "he that looks into the perfect law of liberty and continues, not being a hearer who forgets it but a doer that practices it, this man shall be blessed in his doing" (1:25). Paul's theology agrees with this. "For the grace of God has appeared to all men, bringing salvation, instructing us to deny ungodliness and worldly desires and to live sensibly, righteously, and godly in the present age" -- looking for the appearance of Christ who "redeemed us from every lawless deed" (Titus 2:11-14). Salvation provided by Christ enables us, by avoiding lawless behavior, to deny the unethical direction of worldliness. In his commentary on this passage Calvin wrote, "The revelation of God's grace necessarily brings with it exhortations to a godly life . . . In God's Law there is complete perfection to which nothing else can ever be added."

Paul exhorts us to "have no fellowship with the unfruitful works of darkness" (Eph. 5:11), and it is evident that for Paul the Old Testament law directed God's people in how to avoid such evil fellowship. Citing the law at Deuteronomy 22:10, Paul said "Be not unequally yoked with unbelievers, for what fellowship has righteousness with lawlessness?" (2 Cor. 6:14). Further citing the Old Testament regarding the laws of holiness by which Israel was "separated from" the Gentile nations, Paul goes on to write: "Come out from among them and be separate, says the Lord, and touch no unclean thing; and I will receive you" (v. 17). An example of these Old Testament laws which separated Israel from the world is found in Leviticus 20:22-26, where we see that the observation of these laws (e.g., distinguishing unclean from clean meats) was but symbolic of separation from worldly customs. How was this accomplished? "You shall therefore keep my statutes and all mine ordinances and do them" (v. 22).

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