

**Youth Week 2007**  
**Sunday Morning Message**

**A Holy Church**

**THE MESSAGE**

**Introduction: The Christian Life, at its Heart, is a Communal Life.**

All this week, we've been looking at what holiness means and what it means to be holy. Boiled

**Students Should Learn**

1. While individual holiness is important and necessary, it is through the community of faith that true holiness is exhibited.
2. The Christian life was never meant to live in isolation, but within a community of believers focused on bringing about Kingdom priorities on earth

**Scripture Focus**

John 17:17, 21-22

down to its simplest forms, it is a call to be fully devoted to Christ-likeness in every area of our lives. Of course, it's not something that we can do on our own. Holiness is a work of the Holy Spirit in our lives. In John's Gospel, Jesus is praying for His disciples (17:17-22). But He doesn't stop with them. Jesus prays for all who would become His disciples, that includes you and me. In his prayer, He asks God to "sanctify them by the truth." In this prayer, He's asking for God's Spirit to sanctify us through God's truth.

Whenever Jesus spoke to people about truth, it was never so they could learn something in their heads. He taught about truth in a way that called people to live that truth out in their lives. So Jesus isn't asking God to simply create a holy people by helping them to know God's truth, he is calling for a holy people who become holy by the living out of God's truth. The gift of sanctification comes through the Holy Spirit as we live out the truth of God's word in our lives. We can't sanctify ourselves. But we can join in the sanctifying process by being obedient to what God calls us to do.

We also see in this passage that Jesus is praying for "them." This is an important word. Because today we are going to look at the power of holiness, not just in the life of an individual, but within a community of believers - within the church. Jesus desires for a people that are set apart and completely devoted to following God's truth. He is praying for a people more than he is praying for a person. Look at the pronouns in this passage: "sanctify them, sent them, they may be truly sanctified, them alone, those who will believe, all of them may be one, they also be in us, given them the glory, they may be as one.

While Jesus probably had individuals in mind as he prayed, he never intended for us to live holy lives individualistically. He always modeled the desires of the Father. God has continually desired to have a people that He can call His own. The invitation to be a Christian is an invitation to be a part of a community. I have often heard young people say, "I believe in God

and I'm a Christian, but I don't think that I need to go to church." That is a dangerous position to be in. Unfortunately, the church has spent too many years in the last century promoting a sense of rugged individualism. It does this when it strives to bring a person to a "salvation" experience but does nothing to connect that person to the community of faith. It does it when it allows a Christian person to "come and see" or "come and sit" but doesn't get that person involved in ministering to others. The church is guilty of fostering individualism when it allows people to focus on the kingdom of self more than the Kingdom of God.

The prayer that Jesus prays is for people who have entered into a vital relationship with both God and each other - may they be one. May they move from personal to corporate. May they live as community, not in isolation. May their hearts be changed from me to we.

- When our hearts are changed from me to we, we change our focus from what's in it for me to what can I do for us.
- When our hearts are changed from me to we, we change from what I get out of church to what I put into church.
- When our hearts are changed from me to we, we change our focus on our own needs and focus on the needs of others.
- When our hearts are changed from me to we, we change our "world revolves around me" perspective to a "kingdom of God at work" perspective.
- When our hearts are changed from me to we, we change from what God can do through me to what God can do through us.

### **We are called to be a Holy Community...**

This term is not an oxymoron. Holy and community must go together. I don't believe that we can be holy (in the sense that God calls us to be holy) without the support and vital relationship of the Christian community. On the other hand, I don't think it's possible to be the type of Christian community that is founded in Biblical principles without holiness permeating everything that it is about. Holiness is rooted in community. Christian community flows from a people who strive to be holy. I suggest four ways that our people can grow in the understanding, experience, and practice of corporate holiness.

### **Rooted in the Historic, Christian Faith**

While the twentieth century brought us a wide variety of innovations and technological advances, I believed it moved us farther away from the central understandings of what it meant to be a part of the people of God. Personal salvation, personal redemption, and personal holiness took precedence over a corporate understanding that we were all in this thing together.

A look at some Old Testament passages helps us to see that God was concerned for the nation. While made up of individuals, the community received God's teachings from the perspective of the community.

In Exodus 31, God states that his commands are for the people. He says to them that holiness comes from God and will be a sign to the people that He is their God.

In 2 Chronicles 7, God tells his people to repent in order to receive His healing upon their land, upon their community. It is more than just one person's response, it takes all of the people who are committed to turn their face toward God in order for the blessings of God to be felt.

In Zechariah 7, God instructs the people through his prophet about social justice and how to care for the less fortunate. It is a call for a community to live out their holiness as a nation and government.

Let me ask you a question, how many times have you quoted the passage from Jeremiah 29 that says, "I know the plans I have for you," says the Lord, "plans to prosper you and not to harm you"? If you've claimed this passage for yourself and yourself alone, then you are in danger of taking this promise out of context. The passage is directed at the people of God and is a call for them to live holy lives within the culture that they now find themselves. God states that they will be blessed even though they are far from their home, far from God's ideal, and have forsaken God in the past. It wasn't a passage to be used by an individual thinking that God had a five step plan for their success in mind.

A holy community is one where individuals experience a change of life focus from self to God. When this community gathers to worship, it is God who is the central figure around whom we gather. We must not let anything get in the way of that. The New Testament vision of holiness finds its full meaning only as sanctified persons see themselves essentially as part of a sanctified church. The Scriptures seem to have in mind more than a simple collection of holy ones. There is a call to the community of faith for its life together to be characterized by holiness.

### **Focused on Christian Forgiveness**

One of the issues that can damage authentic, corporate holiness is unforgiveness. Christian relationships afford us ample opportunity for real experiences of self-sacrificing love, the essence of holiness. If we really believe what we say we believe about holiness, our relationships in the church should not so regularly remain broken by unforgiveness.

When we are unwilling to forgive those who have wronged us, it hurts both us and them. We continue to hold on to our anger, our bitterness, our sense of injustice. This just weighs us down and we soon come to live in bondage to it. It also causes a continued broken relationship with the one who wronged us. Choosing to withhold our forgiveness cheapens the grace and forgiveness that God has bestowed on each of us.

In Matthew 18:23, Jesus demonstrates how great a debt God has forgiven us for. He tells the story of a man who owed a huge amount of money. Unable to pay it back, he pleaded with his master for mercy when the master was going to throw him and his family in prison. The master obliged the man, forgiving him of his debt. But when the man left the master's presence, he came across another man who owed him a small amount. The other man also pleaded for mercy, but the man was unwilling to forgive his debt. When the master learned of this man's unforgiveness, he went ahead and threw him in jail. Unforgiveness typically happens when we

seek to satisfy our own interests rather than meeting the needs of others, especially those within the Christian community.

We often don't realize this, but while unforgiveness tears at the fabric of Christian community, it is in and through the act of forgiving that we find great strength and the realization of holy community. Forgiveness allows us the opportunity to respond to a situation through holiness. It shapes our community into a people who respond to others the way Christ responded to us. We gaze upon the cross and recognize that we live as a forgiven community, who in turn, forgive others.

### **Centered Through Unity**

Jesus' prayer was a request for unity. It is interesting to consider Jesus' words as He reflects on the nature of the relationship that He has with the Father and the Spirit. He claims that they are "one." The holy trinity is a relationship. In Jesus prayer, He expects that the perfect community of the Godhead will be reflected in the community of the saints. It is Father, Son, and Spirit working together in harmony toward a common cause, the establishment of God's Kingdom. Jesus understands that there is strength in this "one-ness." His prayer request to the Father is that the people of God would surrender their own interests to the Kingdom interest of serving God and neighbor.

The other aspect of being "one" is identifying with the relationship that the church has with Christ. We are called to "identify with Christ in His sufferings" (Romans 8:17). This identity comes from our being recognized as "children of God." The idea of being God's children is formed out of a sense of family, which is another example of the communal aspect of our faith.

I have come to understand that families do better when they are on the same page with one another. I can think of a recent cell phone ad where a teenager gave his parents a complete itinerary of his day. His special cell phone had a GPS unit on it that showed his parents his exact location. During the commercial, his parents checked his itinerary and his location and they were a match. This made the parents have a feeling of security and peace, knowing where their son was at that moment (which is the way the advertisers want the consumers to feel so that they'll sell more phones).

Unity doesn't mean that everyone in the church is going to agree on everything and come to the same conclusions all the time. But it does mean that we are all striving to be God-centered people and focus our efforts on that which builds the Kingdom. When we are on the same page in our desires, motivations, and mission, we will be better able to work through the relational bumps in the road.

### **Released for Service**

Corporate holiness is much more than a group of Christians being pious. It is the community of faith actively serving each other and engaging a broken world with acts of sacrificial love and service. Consider the early church mentioned in Acts 2 - gathering around the temple together

during the day and at each other's homes during the evening. It was in the context of this growing community that the needs of everyone around them were being taken care of.

Oftentimes, personal holiness gets in the way of our sensitivity to the needs of those around us. Personal spiritual growth apart from acts of service can turn a person into a myopic Christian with no impact on the world. James noted the dichotomy that many would fall into (James 2:17), stating the importance of both faith and works within the life of the community. Holiness isn't a message of information as much as it's a message with impact. To be holy means to be engaged in the things that Christ would be engaged in.

Jesus' prayer alludes to this notion of impacting the world through service when Jesus asks, "May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me." How will the world recognize that Christ is from God? By the way that the community of Christ displays its unity within the world. The world isn't going to care about the love of Christ by how holy we appear on Sunday mornings

## **Closing**

Consider what we're up against in this day and age as we strive to live within the context of this Holy Community. In the first century, people would gather in the temples to hear the Scriptures being read. Today, we each have about 20 different copies/versions of the Bible sitting on our shelves at home. The community gathers to sing praise to God, but we can also just plug our Ipod in and listen to worship CD's with voices that sound a lot better than our own. In fact, much of what has become of spiritual formation during the twentieth century has revolved around learning to pray more, read the Bible more, and be more disciplined. But these things were never meant to be done in isolation, apart from the community of faith.

The challenge is simple: Are you involved in a community with other believers? Are you invested, not just in the life of the church, but in living as the Church? Do you have people in your community of faith that are shaping your faith and growth and encouraging you?

If not, then I encourage you to join in and open yourself up to the input of Christian brothers and sisters. Invest your life into the lives of others. It is going to be harder to stay connected to the community, but it is vital that we do so.