**Buckingham Parish Church**

**Sunday Oct 6th 2024. Series:** Boot Camp for Misson: Equipping the Saints **Theme:** The Call to Holiness

**Reading: Colossians 3: 1-18.**

Today we are back in our boot camp for mission as part of our ongoing preparation and readiness for missions. Of course, this is not a temporary boot camp from which we graduate at the end of the series. Because Christians are called to partner continually with God in bringing good news and light to a difficult and dark world, we must seek to maintain an ongoing spiritual fitness, which will enable us to live joyfully, hopefully and faithfully as those who provide a foretaste of the possibility of a new kind of life; a wholesome life, an eternal life in God.

And our subject for today is of vital importance to building and deepening our spiritual fitness. Over the next few minutes we will consider the subject “the call to holiness” and I want to explore 2 composite thoughts in the time we have: 1. Our view of holiness. 2. The route to holiness.

**Our view of holiness:** I want to begin by asking you a question “can you think of 5 holy people that you know personally today”? Story about conversation with Tosin (Jesus, newborn).

This got me thinking that there must be a real problem with holiness. When we consider how explicit the bible is about the call to holiness:

 **Leviticus 11:44-45**: "For I am the Lord your God. Consecrate yourselves therefore, and be holy, for I am holy. [...] For I am the Lord who brought you up from the land of Egypt to be your God; thus you shall be holy, for I am holy."

 **Leviticus 19:2**: "Speak to all the congregation of the sons of Israel and say to them, ‘You shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy.’"

**Matt 5: 8** Jesus says “be perfect, therefore as your heavenly father is perfect”.

**1Peter 1: 16:** “Just as He who called you is Holy, so be holy in all you do”

So, with such clear directions to be holy, how can it be that it seems all but impossible to find widespread examples of holiness in the lives of those who claim to be following God? Has God set us up for failure – requiring something completely unachievable and unreasonable of us? Alternatively, could it be that we have perhaps got the wrong end of the stick and have somehow not adequately grasped what are God’s intentions and expectations about holiness? Well, for a few moments, let us think about our view of holiness.

What images come to your mind when you think of holiness or a holy person?

Take the point of attire. If you are anything like me, then when I think about holy people, for some reason or another, they tend to be wearing robes. Jesus, Isaiah, Apostle Paul, the desert fathers and mothers, Mother Theresa. They also tend to be… well, dead!.. well maybe not always. I can still think that certain monks and nuns alive today may be holy – they are alive, but they are still in robes!

But why is it, that my image of holy people does not include people in NHS uniforms or school uniform? Why is it not of people in business suit and tie or builder’s attire? Why is it not of someone in a MacDonald’s uniform (other burger brands are available), bus driver or swimming instructor or housewife?

Could this be what God intended? This is not a trivial point. You see, I think that the first problem of our view of holiness is that somehow or the other, the devil has smuggled in this idea that the image of a holy person is one that excludes the everyday person on the street – including you and I. And of course, if our image of holiness is faulty it is no wonder that not only do we feel we cannot attain to it, many often give up trying completely! Could this be what God who called **all** his people to be holy intended?

But this is not all, let us push the point further and ask ourselves what our image of holiness is. Often when we think of holiness, we think of the absence of sin, obedience, humility, quietness, gentleness, austerity. All great attributes that we like to see – especially in other people. Because in our secular, real lives, where we need to get down and dirty to deal with the realities of 21st Century Britain, if we are honest, we know that what tends to get us ahead is to be bold and assertive, self-confident, fun and fun-loving, energetic, charismatic, enigmatic, with a streak of non-conformity – which we sometimes call innovation. These are the things that are valued in our modern-day society, not holiness. (rather be described as fun than holy…).

Moreover, isn’t holiness all about keeping an endless list of rules, being whiter than white and being perfect in everything? Certainly, Paul in our passage from tonight lists a number of things that Christians ought not to do - fornication, impure desires, greed etc. Yet we must ask is this all that there is to holiness? Once again, if this is our view of holiness, it is unsurprising that many Christians are wracked with guilt at being unable to meet up with these requirements. How ironic that we who believe and preach the gospel of forgiveness should be the ones so prone to feeling guilt and shame.

But wait a minute. Is there really a conflict between holiness and being fun, charismatic, assertive, enigmatic, innovative etc. Are guilt and shame the attributes that God wishes to cultivate in His people? Absolutely not! In fact, it is the opposite. C.S Lewis writes: *“How little people know who think that holiness is dull. When one meets the real thing, it is irresistible”.*

**So what does holiness entail – The Route to Holiness**

In our passage, Paul is writing to a group of Christians in what would be modern day Turkey, and he begins with the words “Since then you have been raised with Christ, set your minds on things above, not on earthly things”. We must resist the urge to rush to what Paul has asked these believers to do i.e. to set their minds. Instead, we must fully appreciate what precedes that advise. “Since you have been raised with Christ…” The status of these ordinary men and women from all sorts of walks of life as being “raised with Christ” is the precondition for their ability to set their minds on things above.

Many of you might know very well the story of Augustine of Hippo. He was a man who loved pleasure especially sexual pleasure and if he saw an opportunity to take advantage of others for selfish gain, he often took it. He describes how one day, he looked over the fence at the neighbour’s garden and in there was a tree, ripe with Pears. Augustine and some friends hopped over the fence and stole a bunch of pears. The interesting thing is that Augustine didn’t even like pears. He just stole them for the fun of stealing. He later wrote in his Confessions “I loved the sin not what I gained from the sin”.

Yet, at some point, Augustine, after finding pleasure tiring, and having exhausted his search for meaning in a variety of philosophical and religious formulations without success, eventually discovers in the person of Jesus and a life of holiness, the greatest meaning, pleasure and fulfilment in life. He later wrote these powerful words which to this very day move me to the deepest part of my soul *“Late have I loved you, beauty so ancient and so new, late have I loved you! You were within me, but I was outside, and it was there that I searched for you”.* Augustine has searched for fulfilment in all sorts of places, but all this while, it was near him, indeed within him.

Brothers and Sisters, the command to be holy is not an arbitrary one. The command references God himself. “Be holy as I am holy”. The call to holiness is a call to share in the nature of God, the same God who made the world and all its pleasures the God who gave us as human beings, the ability to appreciate beauty and wonder and laughter. He is the one through whom and by whom all things were created and therefore I think it is safe to say that we will not find a more innovative being in all the universe. He created music and art, gives us the basis for science and in the laws of sowing and reaping, he gives us the basis for business. And we are called to be holy **as He is**. So, the first step towards holiness is to be located in Christ.

But then, Paul also calls the Colossian Christians to set their minds on things above and not on earthly things. What does this mean? Well, I believe Paul here is charging the church to re-order their affections. The journey towards holiness is a journey of constantly reordering our love and the objects of our affection, always seeking each day to lift our gaze slightly higher towards the face of Christ.

In *Mere Christianity*, Lewis writes, "*The real problem of the Christian life comes where people do not usually look for it. It comes the very moment you wake up each morning. All your wishes and hopes for the day rush at you like wild animals. And the first job each morning consists simply in shoving them all back; in listening to that other voice, taking that other point of view, letting that other larger, stronger, quieter life come flowing in." This “larger, stronger, quieter life” is the life of holiness, where the believer is continually choosing to live in alignment with God’s will”.*

There are so many things in our current day that clamour for our attention and demand our affection. Endless social media reels, endless videos on YouTube, 24/7 work – and yes, I include church work in that, freely available pornography, news of wars and calamity near and far, kids activities etc. Some of these things like the serpent clad head of Medusa are calling for our attention and unfortunately too many have become fixated – like stone upon lesser things that will not satisfy and which in some cases, cause real harm.

Yet, holiness gives us an alternative way. Keep your work, keep the children’s activities, even keep the social media reels if you must! But we must adjust our diet to ensure that we are concentrating more, much more on understanding God and his word and applying the things we learn to the lives we lead. There is no secret about this. Paul writing to the Corinthians describes the glory that comes when an individual spends quality time with God 2 Cor 3:16-18 “***16****But whenever anyone turns to the Lord, the veil is taken away.****17****Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom.****18****And we all, who with unveiled faces contemplate[*[*a*](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=2%20Corinthians%203&version=NIV#fen-NIV-28860a)*] the Lord’s glory, are being transformed into his image with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit”.* 5 minutes of bible reading a day before bedtime won’t cut it if we will be serious about God. We must make more time.

The veil in this passage are those things which may be preventing each of us from fully experiencing the transformative power of God’s holiness. When we turn to Christ and make Him our utmost desire, we will find the power to reorder our lives and the things we love towards God.

Please permit me to ask you as I ask myself: “how are you ordering your love?” who/what are the objects of your desire. Do you and I do more than simply pay lip-service to loving God? If we are serious about being Holy, then our focus should not even primarily be to avoid doing wrong things. Rather our focus should be to know God a little more each day. To seek and find Him in the rough & tumble of our daily lives and to desire to love Him just that bit more every passing day.

Col 3:15 ***15****Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, since as members of one body you were called to peace...****16****Let the message of Christ dwell among you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom through psalms, hymns, and songs from the Spirit, singing to God with gratitude in your hearts.****17And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus****, giving thanks to God the Father through him.*

And if we are to love God more, we must help each other and rely on the Holy Spirit. You see, the call to holiness is both an individual one and a communal one which involves the whole body of Christ – the church. We will not have the time to fully explore the communal dimension of holiness today, however we are called to be holy both as individuals and as a whole church. We are not called to travel alone, we are to help one another. (weekend away)

Col 3: 12-14: **12**Therefore, as God’s **chosen people, holy** and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. **13**Bear with each other and forgive one another if any of you has a grievance against someone. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. **14**And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity.

Please look for a moment at the people around you. They matter to your successful walk of holiness. If you and I will be successful in responding to God’s call, then we will need each other’s support. So please let me ask you humbly: “which one of these dear people do you pray for each day, that God will sustain them in their life of holiness?” Do you meet with any other Christians to pray and share your journey of faith? It’s not too late to start today.

As the band comes up. Our time is far spent so we must finish now, however I must stress that none of this will be possible without the help and infilling of the Holy Spirit. It is the Spirit the pours the Love of God into our hearts (Romans 5:5). It is the Spirit that transforms and enables us to be more like Christ each day – holy as He is.

Brothers and sisters, God’s desire is for you and I to be holy. And he doesn’t even intend to call us away from our professions. In God’s plan, we can be holy whether we are teachers or driving instructors, Lawyers or bin men, priests or barbers, parents, grandparents or children. His plan is to have His holy children everywhere in the world. People like you and me.

But if we are to respond to His call, we must first locate ourselves in Christ then we must set our minds on things above by reordering our love, having God as the centre of our desires, the prime object of our affections through the help and power of the Holy Spirit. And we must do it individually and together. Then we will be full of life and fit for whatever mission God may assign.

If you are here today and would like to know God for the first time or to rededicate yourself to him.

To receive the power of the Holy Spirit to enable us re-order our lives. The power to break difficult habits / cycles.

The grace to believe you are forgiven and loved.

1 More love to Thee, O Christ,
More love to Thee!
Hear Thou the prayer I make
On bended knee;
This is my earnest plea:
More love, O Christ, to Thee,
More love to Thee,
More love to Thee!

2 Once earthly joy I craved,
Sought peace and rest;
Now Thee alone I seek,
Give what is best;
This all my prayer shall be:
More love, O Christ, to Thee,
More love to Thee,
More love to Thee!

3 Then shall my latest breath
Whisper Thy praise;
This be the parting cry
My heart shall raise;
This still its prayer shall be:
More love, O Christ, to Thee,
More love to Thee,
More love to Thee!

Elizabeth Payson Prentiss USA 1818-1878.