

# Definition of Holiness

by Daniel Steele

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*The sermon critically examines the definition of holiness, emphasizing its essential qualities and the believer's call to live a life devoted to God.*

**Scripture:** Matthew 5:48, Romans 12:1, 2 Corinthians 7:1, Ephesians 4:24, Philippians 2:5, 1 Thessalonians 4:7, Hebrews 12:14, 1 Peter 1:14, 1 John 3:3, 1 John 4:19

**Topics:** "Holiness", "Sanctification"

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## Description

Daniel Steele preaches on the definition of holiness, critiquing a new definition presented in a book. He highlights the importance of accurately defining holiness by its properties and qualities, emphasizing the need for precision in theological terms. Steele challenges the equivocal phrase 'the love of God' and discusses the concept of perfect love in relation to holiness, pointing out errors in interpreting Scripture. He stresses the continuous growth in holiness after sanctification, advocating for a life of total self-abnegation and obedience to God.

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## Transcript

Definition of Holiness.

LET us now read the author's definition of holiness, the fundamental term in this book:

Holiness is that condition of human nature wherein the love of God rules.

The novelty of this definition is interesting and attractive at first sight. But it will not bear close scrutiny. The following objections arise:

1. It is unnecessary to make new definitions, except in progressive sciences, where new discoveries are constantly made. The definition of atmospheric air made in 1894 must be revised in 1896, since the discovery of a new element in 1895. We must now correct our dictionaries by adding to its constituents, "argon." Although theology in its apprehension is progressive, our author has discovered no new element in holiness requiring a new definition.

2. It lacks the fundamental element of a definition, which Noah Webster says is "a description of a thing by its properties." Not a property of holiness is named, not even a negative property, to say nothing of its positive qualities. How different is this from Webster's meaning of this word as used by the reputable writers in the English language:

Holiness: The state or quality of being holy; perfect moral integrity or purity; freedom from sin ; sanctity; innocence. The adjective "holy," as applied to persons, is thus defined: Spiritually whole or sound: of unimpaired innocence and virtue: free from sinful affections: pure in heart; godly: pious: irreproachable; guiltless, acceptable to God.

3. This so-called definition is so vague and loose that it will describe a score of other abstract nouns denoting different states or qualities. Let us try it on some of them. HAPPINESS is that condition of human nature wherein the love of God rules. Will anybody deny this? Can there be genuine happiness where the love of God does not rule? The definition fits happiness just as well as it does holiness. SONSHIP is that condition of human nature in which the love of God rules. This is undeniable. ASSURANCE is that condition of human nature wherein the love of God rules. FEARLESSNESS is that condition of human nature wherein the love of God rules. The same definition would apply to harmony, gratitude, self-crucifixion, devotion, hope, grace, spirituality, knowledge of God, worship, or philanthropy, which is genuine only in hearts wherein the love of God rules. We might add to these integrity, wisdom, in the scriptural sense, and the whole galaxy of graces called the fruit of the Spirit, centering in love, joy, peace, long-suffering, gentleness, goodness, faith (fidelity), meekness, and temperance, or self-control. Each of these would be defined just as accurately as our author has defined holiness, if we should use the same definition. Our brother's promise of " careful definitions " does not seem to be fulfilled.

4. There remains a still greater objection to this definition of holiness, that it cannot be predicated of God's attribute of holiness. For holiness in man must be the same as holiness in God, else there is no significance in the command of Peter to "obedient children" of God: "Become [aorist] ye yourselves also holy... for I am holy" (I Peter i, 14-16). We cannot take the position of Mansell, that the moral attributes of God may be wholly different from those of man. This is simply agnosticism. I am not prepared to worship a God of unknowable moral character. But the God to whom my sou bows in loyalty and love is he to whom Jesus prays, saying, "Holy Father," and who has revealed himself as "light in whom is no darkness at all." I understand that light is a metaphor for purity, and that darkness rhetorically stands for sin. The negative part of the proposition, the absence of sin, I can understand; but just how to formulate the positive side of holiness in God and in man, and how to state its full meaning, is exceedingly difficult. Dr. M. Raymond gives up the attempt to define holiness positively. Says Professor Beet: "For the more part, writers have contented themselves with assuming, without any proof or any reference to the great difficulty of the subject, a meaning for the word 'holy' when predicated of God, and then expounded their own arbitrary interpretation." Just so. This book is a conspicuous instance of this theological legerdemain. When I took up the book entitled Growth in Holiness, and read the preliminary chapter about the great strides of human progress since John Wesley wrote that " miscellaneous compend," the Plain Account of Christian Perfection, and noted the emphasis laid on "the utmost possible precision in the use of significant terms," and especially that "A positive presentation of the theme is much better than a negative one," I said to myself, perchance the Lord has at last raised up the man who will, by a clear and terse definition, turn the idea of holiness around so that all mankind can get a square look at the positive hemisphere of this heavenly orb. Great, indeed, was my disappointment when this progressive writer -- who convicts of error John Wesley, John Fletcher, John McCiintock, and all the other Johns, John of Patmos hardly excepted -- treats this vital theme as the Scotch preacher did when expounding his chapter: he came to a passage flatly contradicting the high Calvinism which he had just taught; he paused when he came to this Arminian verse and said, "My beloved brethren, we have now come to a text whose exegesis is very difficult; let us look it squarely in the face and pass on."

If the book under criticism had been built on established and universally received definitions, its conclusions would have been far different. This grand fallacy of purposely manufactured definitions vitiates the whole volume. It leads the unwary reader to new and surprising conclusions. So hidden is the error that, if possible, it would deceive the very elect. It is like taking the nine digits and giving each a new value, 1 meaning 9, and 9 meaning 1, and so on; then using them in their new values, and bringing out results which everybody must reject who does not accept the new valuation of the symbols, however exact the arithmetical process.

5. Our next difficulty in accepting this definition of holiness is that it contains an equivocal phrase, "the love of God," which may mean my love to God, or God's love to me. This equivocal phrase enables the writer to play fast and loose with his theme. He evidently starts off in his discussion with the first meaning in his mind, for he says, "They who love God will not knowingly or willfully violate his law." But, as he advances, he announces "that there is but one kind of love with which a discussion like this concerns itself."

We would naturally expect him to say that this is our love to God. But wishing to prove that all believers always have "the same pure and perfect love," he switches off to the second meaning, which he calls "the divine love," God's love to us; "God, as it were, taking a portion of himself and infusing it into our being." Just what this means is beyond my comprehension. I understand how the announcement that God loves me, in the phrase of Paul, "the shedding abroad the love of God -- the knowledge of his love -- in my heart by the Holy Ghost given unto me," awakens love in me responsive to God's great love to me; but how his love to me dwells and rules in me, instead of dwelling and ruling in God, who is the subject of it, is an enigma.

The common sense view is that the love that dwells in a man and rules him is his own love. This love starts into being, and is the first pulsation of spiritual life when God assures me that he loves even me. This love to God may be very feeble by reason of strong evil propensities, or it may be very strong because it has conquered and expelled all proneness to sin. The Wesleyan doctrine of degrees in love, of a love existing in a heart aspiring after purity but not yet made pure, hence an imperfect or mixed love, also the doctrine of the possibility in this life of a pure or perfect love to God and men, are in accord with Scripture and reason.

We now strike one of the cardinal errors of this book, that all love is perfect love, the error which requires an unreasonable exegesis of the First Epistle of John that, in the phrase perfect love, "perfect" means nothing, and which operates to deter every young convert, every stationary Christian or old babe in Christ, from pressing on unto perfection, and from seeking perfect love because they have it already, and have had from the first throb of the new life. Such persons naturally say, "Soul, take thine ease," don't be aspiring after perfect love, "Eat, drink," and enjoy the church entertainments; you have perfect love already, for a Methodist doctor of divinity tells you so.

Yet this is the author who complains of the so-called "second blessing" theory because "it makes no suitable provision for perpetual advance, it offers no goal of attainment." This he said when he knew that it offers a constant incentive to apply more and more the implanted inward principle of holiness to the details of life and to the perfection of character; for the first words in his book is a quotation from Milestone Papers, which gives prominence to "a work which still remains to be done."

I have intimated the difficulty in stating the positive quality in holiness. Some think that it is not a distinct quality, but the full-orbed and symmetrical manifestation of all the moral attributes of God and of those

created in his image -- love, justice, wisdom, and truth. The derivation of "holy" from "whole," "wholly," seems to favor this theory, but I find nothing in the terms used in the original Scriptures to confirm this theory.

Another view is that it is that quality of love which prompts its righteous subject to a perfect devotement to its object, with pity where there cannot be righteous delight. Such is the kind of love which God has toward men. His self-devotement in the gift of his Son to the cross wrung the heart of the Father with infinite pain. We agree with Dr. Fairbairn, that the doctrine that the Father did not suffer in the atonement detracts from this central Christian truth, inasmuch as it affords no measure of his love, which is manifested only by self-sacrifice. Holiness in men is perfect self-devotement to God and to his Son, our adorable Saviour, and to our fellow-men. This theory, originated by another, seems to be philosophical and not unscriptural. It is the element of perfect self-sacrifice in our love and in God's love. But how can holiness, thus negatively and positively defined, be predicated of a babe in Christ just born of the Spirit? He is called holy because he has entered into that company to whom that word is technically applied because they are called to be holy, and he has the seed of holiness implanted in him. He has stepped across the line which separates the wicked from the righteous, and is facing the serene heights of perfect purity up to which he aspires to climb. He is not holy in the sense that he is not exhorted to pray that he may be sanctified wholly. He is an infant in that company of believers who, like Milton's angels, sing,

In our proper motion we ascend

Up to our native seat; descent and fall

To us is adverse.

Yet we must remember that the word "saint" was a technical term denoting a member of the visible Church, and did not certainly designate a pure life. Says Professor Beet: "The priests were holy, whatever their conduct." He adds: "The word saint is a very appropriate designation of the followers of Christ; for it declares what God requires them to be."

One has humorously said that Paul called Christians saints on the same principle that some small and struggling American schools are called universities, because the founders had large hopes. As objects of hope they are universities, but not in reality. The term "holy" points to our privilege and obligation to live lives free from sin and wholly devoted to Christ, who died that we might not live unto self. In every pulpit and prayer meeting the fact should be constantly rung out that all who have taken upon themselves the name of Christ are called to be saints, holy ones.

In this view of the subject there is, after entire sanctification, a growth in the positive element of holiness. This is taught by Wesley in the continual increase of love in a pure heart, as the spiritual life day by day develops in its utmost fullness, enjoying that real freedom in which obedience to God is not hindered by any inward opposition. Hence we insist that the believer's complete development is realized only by a supreme act of self-crucifixion, followed by a life of total self-abnegation; in the words of Wesley, "naked, following a naked Christ," whose holiness as the "Son of man" was evinced in his coming into the world, "not to be ministered unto, but to minister, and to give his life a ransom for many."

This doctrine has always been disliked by self-centered men, whether nominal Christians or not, men filled with self-will, self-seeking, self-sufficiency, and self-righteousness. When the Church tones down or neglects to preach this essential and vital doctrine to please such men and gain their support, she betrays

her Lord for money and commits suicide besides.

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