

Holiness: It's Definition

by G. Campbell Morgan

G. Campbell Morgan's sermon defines holiness as the character of God that inspires righteous living, emphasizing its importance in the Christian faith.

Scripture: Luke 1:74

Topics: "Righteousness", "Holiness"

Description

G. Campbell Morgan emphasizes the dual aspects of holiness and righteousness in the life of a believer, illustrating that holiness pertains to character while righteousness pertains to conduct. He explains that true holiness is rooted in the character of God, which is a combination of grace and truth, and that believers are called to serve God in holiness and righteousness as a result of their salvation through Christ. Morgan addresses the common misconceptions and fears surrounding the concept of holiness, urging Christians to embrace it as a vital aspect of their faith and relationship with God. He concludes by encouraging believers to seek a deeper fellowship with Christ, which enables them to live out holiness and righteousness in their daily lives.

Transcript

THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO LUKE IS THAT OF THE Universal Saviour. In it, Jesus is seen as Man, and His work is dealt with in its widest application. The true ideal of God's ancient people Israel is recognized. Messiah is revealed as of the stock of Abraham, and yet as the Saviour of all men. The song of Mary, the prophecy of Zacharias, the chanting of the angels, and the speech of Simeon, all sacred and beautiful utterances peculiar to the Gospel, recognize Jesus both as the Messiah of the ancient people according to their prophecies; and as the Saviour of all such as put their trust in Him, without regard to nationality. The benefits accruing to the chosen people are recognized, but they are ever seen flowing through them to all peoples. In the song of Zacharias, which our text is found, Jehovah the God of Israel is declared as visiting, redeeming, and raising up a horn of salvation in the house of David; but the purpose of this visitation of His ancient people is that the light may shine on them that sit in darkness, and in the shadow of death.

In order to perform this wider mission, the Messiah brings to His own people "salvation from our enemies and from the hand of all that hate us, to show mercy toward our fathers and to remember His holy covenant, the oath which He should swear to Abraham our father, to grant unto us that we being delivered out of the hand of our enemies should serve Him without fear, in holiness and righteousness before Him

all our days."

These two words, holiness and righteousness, mark two aspects of one condition. Holiness has to do with character; righteousness with conduct. They cannot possibly be separated from each other. They are as intimately related as are root and fruit. There can be no fruit unless there be a root. If there be living root it must issue in fruit. There can be no righteousness unless there is holiness; holiness must issue in righteousness. Holiness describes being; righteousness describes doing.

The particular word translated holiness in this verse occurs twice only in the New Testament; in this passage, and in the letter to the Ephesians, in which the apostle urges those to whom he writes to "put on the new man, which after God hath been created in righteousness and holiness of truth." In each case it is linked with the word righteousness. Thus in each of these passages the root principle out of which righteousness grows is recognized.

"In holiness and righteousness." The essential meaning of holiness is right but it is right in intrinsic character. The essential meaning of righteousness is right, but it is right in actual conduct.

In the son of Zacharias holiness and righteousness are declared to be the condition of life resulting from the salvation which the Messiah and Saviour should bring to men. In the Ephesian letter righteousness and holiness are declared to be the result of the new man created after God. Thus whether we take the passage from the song of Zacharias, which recognizes the right and privilege and responsibility of Israel, and all the Divine intention to bless the peoples through Israel; or whether we take the specific writing of the New Testament apostle, it is perfectly evident that the work of Christ was directed toward righteousness of life, issuing from holiness of character.

Let us, then, consider this subject of holiness according to New Testament teaching. It is a very remarkable fact that thousands of the saints of God are a little afraid of the word "holiness." I believe a great many Christian people keep away from all sorts of conventions and conferences because of this fear. It is not very long since a very dear friend of mine, a Christian man, said to me, You know, I don't believe in holiness. I told him how very sorry I was to hear it, because the Bible says that without holiness no man can see the Lord, Of course, he did not mean quite what he said. I have quoted it only to indicate the attitude toward this great word, and this great subject, which is alarmingly prevalent in the Christian Church. I recognize the reason of this fear. A great many unholy things have been said and done by those who perhaps have been loudest in their attempt to explain, and in their claim to the experience of holiness.

Yet is it quite fair that we should turn away from a great word, and a great thought, and a great intention of the Christian religion, because the word itself has been prostituted to base uses, and an interpretation of its meaning not warranted by the Scripture has become widespread and popular? It is well that we should understand what the New Testament teaches, for this much is evident, whatever God means by holiness, whatever the intention of the Holy Spirit is by the use of the term, whatever the New Testament writers meant when they used the word, that for holiness Christ came into the world; that the real intention of His coming was that men being delivered from their enemies might be able to serve Him in holiness and righteousness before Him all their days; that the ultimate charge of Paul in this great crowning letter of his whole system of teaching is that Christians should put off the old man, and put on the new, which is created after God in holiness and in righteousness.

Therefore, with the utmost simplicity of statement of which I am capable, I want, first of all, to speak by way of definition. What is holiness? In the first place, let me repeat in one brief sentence the sum and

substance of that already said in introduction. Holiness is rightness or rectitude of character, inspiring righteousness, which is rightness or rectitude of conduct. There is no motive for right conduct sufficiently strong to maintain it in all places, and under all conditions, other than holiness of character. Any other motive breaks down sooner or later. Men do right things from self-respect for a very long while, but sooner or later, under stress of temptation, swift and sudden and subtle, or in the presence of some alluring advantage, they will turn to the thing that is mean and low and dastardly and ignoble. A high sense of duty is not enough at all times and under all circumstances to compel righteousness of conduct; and it is perfectly certain that if men are right only from policy they will break down. There is an old maxim I remember writing when I was a boy in my copybooks, Honesty is the best policy. I think it is true, but it is a pernicious thing to give a child to write, because you thereby inculcate an entirely wrong view of honesty. Honesty is the best policy. Is that the reason why I am to be honest? Then I shall become a rogue before many years pass over my head. The man who is honest only because it is the best policy is a rogue at heart. No, policy is not enough to compel righteousness. To do right at all times and under all circumstances is only possible to the man who is right in the deepest of him. There is no other motive sufficiently strong to impel and compel righteousness of conduct than that of holiness of character. Now the thought suggested by the word holiness, as the thought suggested by the word righteousness, is that of a standard, What is the standard of holiness? If holiness be rectitude of character, what is rectitude of character? The only answer possible to such an inquiry, at least to the mind of the Christian believer, is that the standard of holiness of character is the character of God. I know how hard that sounds, and yet what other can I say? Holiness is not an idea, formulated in experience, by which we measure God. It is an idea in human experience derived from the revelation which God has made of Himself to humanity. And whether men to-day are worshiping our God after our fashion or not, every true ideal of holiness obtaining in our common life is derived from revelation, and God remains forevermore the ultimate standard both of holiness and of righteousness. Holiness in man therefore is approximation to the character of God. Righteousness in man is partnership in the activity of God. So that holiness and righteousness alike, in the experience of man, result from fellowship with God.

And yet so far that is but to define a method of discovery rather than to state the discovery. I once again ask, and I know the difficulty of my inquiry, what is the holiness of God? Will you allow me to say, talking quite freely and familiarly to you, I have sat down quite alone in the presence of that inquiry and attempted to discover the answer, and all the while I have seemed to know the meaning, and yet have been unable to define it. The only definition, therefore, that I shall venture to make is by quotation of words occurring in the New Testament descriptive of Jesus. For, after all, is not that the only way to know God? Must I not find my way to a knowledge of God through Him? If you take Him away, then I am in the midst of an infinite and incomprehensible and overwhelming Wisdom and Might, which I cannot know. But when I come into the presence of Jesus I know God. I read this wonderful thing written of Him by the seer of blue Galilee, John the mystic: "The law was given by Moses; grace and truth came by Jesus Christ." And to my inquiring heart, in thinking of this subject, and asking what is the holiness of God, that is the only answer that came, from which I could not escape. What is holiness? Grace and truth. I may speak of the love of God, and declare that at the center of love is holiness, and yet is that quite accurate as definition? Is not holiness rather the combination of these two things, grace and truth? Take that word "grace," in its more original intention, not so much as descriptive of the great river of tender compassion and mercy and mighty salvation which, flowing through the ages, heals men. Oh, that is grace, and some of us still like, with our friends of the Salvation Army, to sing

Grace is flowing like a river.

Yes, but what is the nature of the river? Grace is love in action. That is, grace and truth. Love is grace, and its action is truth. We cannot possibly divide these things. Jesus Christ, describing the devil on one occasion, said two things concerning him: "He was a murderer from the beginning." "He is a liar, and the father thereof." Those are the superlative opposites of grace and truth. What is the opposite of grace? Murder, the ultimate of hate. What is the opposite of truth? A lie.

Holiness in God is the combination, or unity of grace and truth. We cannot speak of cause and effect when we speak of these in action. Everything God does is inspired of love, and governed by truth. That is holiness in God; and in the universe, and in all human history, that is the standard of holiness. The holiness of God is the standard of holiness in man. Holiness in man means approximation to the character of God.

I am not now dealing with the methods by which this is made possible, with the earlier statements of this song of Zacharias, that He came to deliver us out of the hand of our enemies, but rather with the result of that great deliverance, "that we . . . should serve Him without fear, in holiness and righteousness." Holiness in man is right relation to God, resulting in participation in the very character of God. I go back to the very beginning of the story of man as told in the Bible, and I read that man was made in the Divine image, and after the Divine likeness. The enemy entered with temptation at the base of which was the infinite blasphemy that he proposed to present the initial purpose as an ultimate goal. You shall be like gods. Therein lay the subtlety of the temptation. It was suggested that man should realize the highest, be like God, but should do so by a wrong method. I have quoted the Genesis story only to lead on to the ultimate word of Jesus: "Ye, therefore, shall be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect"; and to another word in the Ephesian letter, "Be ye therefore imitators of God, as beloved children."

Holiness of character, then, is approximation to the character of God, which is love and truth. If we were less conventional, and could now pass into absolute silence, in order to apply that test to our own lives, what a startling experience it would be for very many of us. How far am I in character a man of grace and of truth? I choose to ask the question personally, rather than of any other, for there are things the preacher cannot say to men, but must say with men. I shrink from the test, yet that is holiness, a life love-mastered, and true in its every activity. Moreover, it was in order that men should be holy that Jesus came. That is the meaning of the Christian religion. The Christian religion is not an arrangement by which a man can sin and escape the penalty. The Christian religion is great and glorious deliverance from enemies in order that in holiness and righteousness we may serve God. And to be satisfied with anything short of this character is to be satisfied with something short of the intention and purpose of the coming of our Lord into the world.

Righteousness, then, is conduct inspired by grace, and governed by truth. In business life, professional life, political life, how far are we righteous? We are righteous in the measure in which we are holy.

Thus, if we take these New Testament words, and interpret them in the light of New Testament teaching, we do not drag the idea of holiness to the dust. We are compelled rather, whether we will or not, to climb the mountain, and feel the rare and searching atmosphere above the snow line. Oh, my God, I am inclined to put my hand on my lips, and say I am a leper, unclean, unclean! By these standards the life of the past week is unhealthy, and the man who glibly declares that he has been holy for seven years has never seen the light, or climbed to the whiteness of the purity of God.

But if this thing is to search our hearts, and humble our spirits, it is nevertheless part of an evangel. He came to deliver us from our enemies in order that we might serve Him in holiness and righteousness all our days. And if we look back over the life of the past week, and over the whole period of our Christian experience, and know how little we have been love-mastered, and truth-governed, let us remember that it is because of the very enemies from whom He came to deliver us. If we have not yet been delivered our inquiry should be, not how are we to climb to that height of holiness, but how we can submit ourselves to the Christ that He may be able to lift us to the height of holiness? He came to deliver us, and if He has not delivered us it is because we have not put ourselves absolutely and utterly under His control.

Now, brethren, if that is holiness essentially and eternally in God and in man -- because I would not for all my soul send away any child of God who is aspiring after the heights and earnestly desiring to attain thereto, discouraged or crushed or broken--let me spend a few moments in speaking of what holiness is experimentally and temporally. I am not going to lower the standard for a moment, but I do propose to declare the measure in which holiness of character is possible, and what the experience is, according to the teaching of the New Testament. And I will do that quite briefly in seven statements, which, in the first place, are negative, but each of which has its positive side.

Holiness is not freedom from all sin as imperfection: but it is freedom from the dominion of sin, and from wilful sinning. I say that holiness is not freedom from all sin as imperfection. Now let me in the simplest way explain that. What is sin? I fall back upon the word most often translated sin in the New Testament, or the Hebrew word most often translated sin in the Old Testament, each of which has the one significance. "Sin," taking the word in its most general sense, is missing the mark, imperfection. Whether I can help it or not does not matter, does not enter into the thought of this particular word. The ideal is recognized, if I do not realize it, that is sin, missing the mark. In that sense holiness for to-day does not mean sinlessness. At best, we are unprofitable servants, and in the present life we never can come to the absolute perfection of consummation. In the sight of heaven, and according to the infinite standards of God, everything lower than the highest is sin.

But holiness does mean freedom from the dominion of sin. I need not be mastered by sin, and I never need sin wilfully. Surely, brethren, I need not argue that. I know how it has been argued, and yet think, and think quietly and simply and honestly, is there any need that I should wilfully sin? In the presence of a clear shining of light, when two paths are in front of me, and I am called to choose, there can be no necessity that I should walk in the wrong one. Perhaps there is no escape for a man who has never yet crowned the Christ. But He came to deliver me from my enemies, and He has made possible the freedom of the will. I can understand that somebody studying psychology says to me, What do you mean? I mean this, "To me who would do good evil is present." That is the language of the man who has never yet known perfectly the power of Christ. But the language of the man, that same man under the dominion of Christ, is this, "I can do all things in Him that strengtheneth me." I will the good, and do the evil, until I have surrendered myself to the Lord Christ. But when I have surrendered to Him, I will the good, and do it. Thus my will is free, for action follows its choice.

Imperfect still, at the close of every day I hasten back to the cleft Rock, to the shelter of the blood redemption; and yet all the way it is possible, in this life, in the power of the present Christ, not to sin wilfully.

But again: Holiness is not freedom from mistakes in judgment; but it is freedom from the need to exercise judgment alone. To the end of the chapter we may make mistakes in judgment, out of absolute sincerity

and loyalty to Christ; but at least remember this, we are not left alone to exercise our judgment if we are under the dominion of this One Who was manifested to deliver us from all our enemies. We can have government and light. You tell me God does not speak to men as He did to Abraham. Will you let me correct that statement? This is the truth, men are not listening as Abraham listened. Right in the depth of the soul, by a direct and definite revelation, He will speak to the man who wants to hear Him. I would to God there might be throughout all the churches of Jesus Christ a return to a recognition of the doctrine of the truth of the inner light. We can have guidance about the business we are to take up, the profession we are to follow, the house in which we are to live. Of course, the trouble is that we seek guidance so seldom.

Again: Holiness is not freedom from temptation, but it is freedom from the paralysis which necessitates failure. So far from being freedom from temptation, holiness means a new sense of temptation, a new attack of the forces of evil; but holiness means freedom from that paralysis, that necessitates failure under temptation. Tempted I shall be to the end, but defeated I need not be.

Holiness, does not mean freedom from bodily infirmity, but it does mean freedom from all ailments which are the direct result of disobedience.

There is a vast amount of physical sickness in the Church of God that ought not to be there. And if there were real holiness of life there would be a great absence of very much which we suffer.

Holiness does not mean freedom from conflict, but it does mean freedom from defeat. I know at that point some of my friends do not agree. They say that the life of holiness means cessation of conflict. I do not believe it. I believe that to the end there will be conflict. Against principalities, against powers, the world rulers of this darkness, spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places, we have to fight our way through. But there need not be defeat. The great and gracious word of the apostle comes back to the mind "Having done all to stand."

Holiness is not freedom from liability to fall, but it is freedom from the necessity of falling.

The freedom of the will remains as an essential part of redeemed human nature, and it is ever possible to choose to turn aside from the path of obedience; but the freedom of the will in the new sense, to which we have before referred, means that we can ever yield ourselves in hours of crisis to "Him that is able to guard us from stumbling."

And once again, and finally: Holiness is not freedom from the possibility of advance, but it is freedom from the impossibility of advance. Holiness does not mean that those who are living the life of present holiness have now arrived at a stage of Christian experience from which there can be no advance. It means rather a condition of life which makes it possible to advance. On a previous occasion I have spoken of health as being holiness, and of growth as being consequent thereupon. Such is the relationship of holiness to advancement. You gave yourself to Christ but recently, but a few days, or weeks, or months ago, therefore you are but a babe in Christ, you have but commenced the journey. You can be holy, and yet there is much for you to know, to learn; and ere the work be done in you there will be long years of advancement and growth and development. Holiness, I repeat, is not a condition from which it is not possible to advance. It is a condition in which it is possible to advance.

And now turning back again for conclusion to the actual word of this great song of Zacharias, I pray you remember that the Christ around Whose name and Whose presence we are gathered this morning came that we might be delivered out of the hands of our enemies, in order that we might "serve Him in holiness

and righteousness all our days."

What there is in us therefore that is unlike grace and unlike truth is there because we have never allowed our Lord to win His victory, and have His way.

May He lead us into such close fellowship with Himself that in the measure possible to us at the moment the very purpose of His coming may be fulfilled as we begin the life that is inspired by holiness of character and expressed in righteousness of conduct.

Source: <https://sermonindex.net/speakers/g-campbell-morgan/holiness-its-definition/>

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