

HOLINESS IN ETHICS IN THE 21ST CENTURY

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INTRODUCTION

Papua New Guinea must be one of the most fascinating places in the world to live. Probably the only thing more fascinating and exciting than living in Papua New Guinea is the opportunity and the privilege to minister in Papua New Guinea. The land is so beautiful, the people and the culture so unique. Everywhere you go, there is a sense of beauty and distinctness. As I have travelled and visited different villages, in each one, I sense that I am in a place that is different than any other place. I am in a place that follows its own special cultural rules. I sense that each village is somehow “set apart” from other villages. People live differently, dress differently, cook differently, eat differently, do things differently, and think differently. This does not mean that one is better than the other, but it does highlight for us one of the key concepts or ideas to be grasped, as we consider holiness – and holiness in ethics – the idea to “set apart”.

HOLINESS AND ETHICS IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

The idea of the holiness movement was not something that began with the Protestant reformation. Holiness was an idea, no, it was more than an idea, it was a command from the mind of God, from the very beginning of time. In Gen 2:3, God blessed the seventh day and made it holy. In Ex 3:5, Moses was told he was standing on holy ground. In Ex 19:5-6, God made this statement: “Now if you obey Me fully, and keep My covenant, then out of all nations you will be My treasured possession. Although all

the earth is Mine, you will be for Me a kingdom of priests, and a *holy* nation.” In 1 Peter 1:16, the apostle Peter quotes the words of Lev 11:45, when he says “therefore be holy, because I am holy”.

Throughout the Old Testament, we see many references to this idea that God’s people were a holy people, a people set apart. Their holiness, however, was not passed on genetically. To be Jewish did not carry with it an automatic conferral of holiness. God makes this clear in Ex 31:13, when he tells Moses that the keeping of the Sabbath day will be a sign that “I am the LORD, who makes you holy”. Holiness is something that can only be achieved by allowing, permitting, or inviting God to do this special work in our lives.

HOLY NATION OF ISRAEL

Having established that holiness is a requirement from God, and not the Salvation Army, nor any denomination, it is important to try and understand what is in God’s mind, as He forms this holy nation of Israel. For some people, to be holy is equivalent to being elevated so far above those around you, and being completely oblivious to any needs or special circumstances that might be adversely affecting anyone in your community. Holiness is NOT, as an old saying goes, “being so heavenly-minded that you are no earthly good”. If anything, holiness is the opposite of this concept.

A careful study of the Old Testament will show us that the clear intention of God for the people of Israel was for them to be a witness – a shining light – in a very dark land. They were to be holy-living people, and by this, they were to be an ethical-practising people. The issues facing the Israelite people dealt primarily with survival: survival, not only in a harsh and unpredictable environment, but survival, while being surrounded by harsh and unpredictable neighbours.

Many people often refer to Old Testament stories to justify brutality toward fellow people. This sort of behaviour was often condemned by God, and, if not, it was rarely sanctioned by God. The stories that continue to ring home with truth and conviction are stories like Ruth, an Edomite woman, who was accepted into the nation of Israel, even though

she was from a foreign background. Then there is the story of Naaman in 2 Kings 5, the foreign ruler who experienced healing from his skin disease. There is also the story of the city of Ninevah, found in the book of Jonah – about a people who repented, and received God’s forgiveness and grace, not His wrath. The ethical consideration that underscores these well-beloved stories is “obedience”.

OBEDIENCE TO GOD

By being obedient to God, the Israelites were to encourage the surrounding nations to be drawn, or attracted, to the Israelite community, and, ultimately, to their God. They were to live lives that were “set apart” from the people who lived near them. They were to show the nations, by their actions, by their high morals and ethics, that faith and belief in the one true God was the only way to find true happiness and success in life. By being obedient to God, and resistant to the temptations all around them, the Israelite nation was meant to be a shining star in a galaxy of black holes.

We know the sad story of how the reverse actually happened. The Israelites, instead of seeking and pursuing holiness, fell into the trap of conformity. They wanted to be like their neighbours. The Israelites wanted a king to rule over them, as the other nations had. In 1 Sam 8:5, the people demanded of Samuel, “now appoint a king to lead us, such as all the other nations have”. Then we read how God shares with Samuel these very sad words, “it is not you they have rejected, but they have rejected Me as their king” (1 Sam 8:7). The results led to an unholy Israel. It led to an Israel that was not much different than the surrounding nations. God’s *holy* nation involved itself in unholy and unethical practices: wars, internal strife, corruption, elitism, extreme nationalism, which can lead to a type of ancient terrorism, witchcraft, sorcery, polygamy, adultery in high places, dishonesty, idolatry, civil wars, evil plots, and assassinations. These were some of the ethical questions, dilemmas, and issues the Israelites faced in their day.

To what extent do we become involved in these sorts of activities? These issues were critical ethical issues that had to be dealt with by the leaders of the holy nation of Israel. Sadly, history shows they did not do so well.

These may not be the issues we deal with today, but, by looking at how Israel failed, maybe we can learn a lesson. The temptations of the surrounding nations became too great for them, and, slowly but surely, they began the slippery ride from a *holy* nation to a copycat nation. From a nation set apart for holiness to a nation conformed to the unholy activities of the surrounding nations.

NOT ABANDONED BY GOD

These sorts of activities compounded, and eventually led to, the capture of the Israelites by the dreaded and barbaric rulers to the North, the Assyrians in 722 BC and the Babylonians in 586 BC. Israel, although captured, was not abandoned by God. Just because she had abandoned God, did not mean that He would abandon her. Numerous prophets and voices of God were heard continuously, as God, through His prophets, warned and pleaded with His people to return to Him, and to pursue holiness, in the true meaning of the word. A section from Is 33:14-16 asks, “Who of us can dwell with the consuming fire? Who of us can dwell with everlasting burning?” The answer is given, “He who walks righteously, and speaks what is right, who rejects gain from extortion, and keeps his hands from accepting bribes, who stops his ears against plots of murder, and shuts his eyes against contemplating evil – this is the man who will dwell on the heights.”

Many other prophets exhort the nation to return to living a holy lifestyle. A verse that summarises this plea is Mic 6:8, “He has shown you, O man, what is good. And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God.” This was the plea of God’s heart, because His people were behaving in the opposite way. They were not acting justly, they did not love or show mercy, and they were not walking humbly with God. They were not practising holy ethics in their living. God continued to call and plead for His people to obey Him.

God’s call and demand for a holy life, however, had not waned. It was still a crystal-clear calling, and a crystal-clear command from God to His people: “Be holy, because I am holy” (Lev 1:45). Yet, it appeared on the

outside, that these “holy” people were not living ethical lives as God had planned. They had not yet climbed above ordinary living.

HOLINESS AND ETHICS IN JESUS

If holiness cannot be taught, then maybe it can be caught. Enter Jesus of Nazareth. Jesus revealed to us deity in humanity. Jesus showed us, in a new way, that God had not given up on humanity, however, God still demands obedience from His chosen people. Jesus demonstrated for us, in human form, what it meant to live a holy “set apart” life. Jesus gave us a picture of humanity, the way it could be, and the way it should be.

So we see that God has, from the beginning, called people to a life of holiness. As John Hay Jr puts it, “It can be seen in the entire creative/redemptive activity of God. History is the story of redemption, in sweeping cosmological proportions; from the creative activity of God, and His desire to restore fellowship after the Fall, through His patient dealings with Israel, to the church, through Jesus Christ, the constant theme is God seeking *holy* humanity”¹ (italics mine). As Christians, we are followers of Christ; we are disciples of Christ. We seek to emulate, to imitate, Him, in every part of our living. As we strive to accomplish this, we are striving towards holiness. And, by staying focused on Jesus, we can also develop principles to put holiness into practice. We can be ethical in our everyday living. As we study the life of Jesus, we discover the common theme of obedience. As one song writer, John Henry Sammis, put it, “trust and obey, for there’s no other way to be happy in Jesus, but to trust and obey”.²

ETHICAL DECISIONS

What examples do we have of Jesus demonstrating ethical decisions? Surely this is the example we are to follow as we consider holiness in modern-day ethics. Jesus certainly did not have to consider issues we are faced with in the 21st century. The world Jesus lived in was very different from the world we live in, however, the principles Jesus used to guide His life can still be our guide for today, as we seek to navigate

¹ John Hay Jr, *Preachers’ Magazine*, December 1986, p. 13.

² John Henry Sammis, *Salvation Army Song Book*, Number 397.

through the maze of ethical issues confronting 21st-century humanity. Many times, the Pharisees tried to catch Jesus on some thorny issue that would make it look like He was choosing sides: either the side of the ruling powers of Rome, or the side of the religious leaders of Jerusalem. Each time, Jesus thoroughly frustrated their attempts. He did so by refusing to choose either side, but choosing to see the situation through God's eyes.

One example, presented in all synoptic gospels (Matt 22; Luke 20; Mark 12), was when the Pharisees presented a coin to Jesus, and asked about paying taxes to Caesar. Many local leaders were saying it was not right to pay tax to Caesar, because that was only helping Caesar suppress the people. If Jesus chose the side of the Roman government, the people would be against Him, if Jesus chose the side of the people, then the Romans would be against Him. The response Jesus gave, "Give to Caesar what is Caesar's, and to God what is God's", was one that amazed those who asked the question.

HOLY PEOPLE

In Luke 10:25-37, when an expert in the law asked Jesus about eternal life, Jesus asked the man to interpret the law. Jesus asked him, "How do you read it?" Then Jesus went on to tell the story of the Good Samaritan, to teach about the meaning of loving a neighbour. The story goes against our humanity, against our human thinking. It just doesn't seem right to even think this way, but this is the way God wants us to think as *holy people*, and ethics is all about placing God thoughts into action.

Then there is the story of the woman caught in adultery. She had been caught in the act. The law says she can be stoned. Many believe she should be stoned. What was Jesus' response? "If any one of you is without sin, let him be the first to throw a stone at her" (John 8:7). In effect, Jesus proclaimed forgiveness – forgiveness to an undeserving sinner. And this is the crux of the whole issue of holiness and ethics. As humans, we want to enforce rules when someone else is in the wrong, but we want the rules to be changed or slackened when we are in the wrong. (One of our daughters was very instrumental in designing a duty roster for doing the dishes. Some days she checks the list, and discovers her name

when she has other plans. She believes it is okay for someone else to take her place in this case. Then, there are days when someone else is scheduled, but no reason is a good enough to allow one of her sisters the same privilege.)

We are a paradox. We are a contradiction in terms. As John Hay puts it, “We have the highest possibilities of all living things, yet we live fallen lives. Instead of fulfilling a creative and holy calling, we have become God’s heartache. We are, in the words of Pascal, both ‘the glory and scandal of the universe’.”³ Is it any wonder we are in such a desperate need of a Saviour?

With Jesus, we see holiness personified. We see how a human can interact with other humans. We see, demonstrated for us, kindness and acceptance toward all people. We see the moral and ethical behaviour that God expects, and demands, from us, in the life of Jesus. The Bible, the ethical guidebook we have, hangs on the pivotal point of the life of Jesus. With some minor exceptions, everything written before Him points to His appearing. Everything written after Him looks back on His life. As we consider the sort of man Jesus was, we see that He is the example we are to follow. To seek holiness, is to seek to be Christ-like. To have a holiness approach to ethics, is to have a Christ-like approach to ethical issues. The worth of the individual person is not to be diminished. The individual is to be lifted and encouraged, the individual is to be forgiven and renewed. This is the ethics demonstrated by Jesus. This is the ethics we are called to put into practice.

HOLINESS IN ETHICS IN THE 21ST CENTURY

Many of the issues we are called to deal with today in our world did not exist when Jesus lived. For example, issues such as abortion, pornography, just wars, medical ethics, business ethics, child labour, human rights violations, AIDS, terrorism, and justified terrorism. We may never have to face in reality many of the burning ethical questions that exist – others we will. Some issues are very similar, no matter the age in which we live, nor the culture in which we live.

³ Hay, *Preachers’ Magazine*, p. 14.

MAN'S INHUMANITY TO MAN

Reinhold Niebuhr, the great theologian from the 20th century, once posed this question, "Can we escape man's inhumanity to man?"⁴ And this question lies at the heart of ethics in any age. How do we justify, or make decisions, that involve people suffering? In many cases, we fit into one of two categories. Either we are acting inhumanely toward others, in our actions, in our words, or in our thoughts, or we are being the victims of someone else's inhumane actions. Jesus clearly tells us how to respond if we are in the second group. We are to bear it, stand up under the unjust sufferings, and wear them like a crown. If we fit into the first group, then Jesus clearly points out that we do not belong there.

The ethical issues that each of us faces is different. The temptations we face are different given our situations. Some of us may have to deal with a Christ-like approach to AIDS. Others may have to work through a Christ-like approach to personal finance. Some may have to work through a Christ-like approach to unwanted prejudicial feelings toward a clan or group of people. Some may have to work through what it means to have a Christ-like approach to work as a Salvation Army officer, or as a pastor in any denomination.

Whether we lived in the 21st century BC, or whether we live in the 21st century AD, we are still called to practise a holiness that has to do with being set apart and to practise ethics that have to do with making right choices. Holiness in ethics should give us a picture in our minds that God has set us apart to make right choices.

We can do this with a sense of confidence, as we remember this: Jesus came to heal the brokenhearted, and bring good news to the oppressed. As followers of Jesus, we are to bring this same message to a desperately needy humanity.

DEMONSTRATING HOLINESS IN ETHICS

The issue of holiness in ethics can be summed up by demonstrating:

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 13.

- **Obedience** – Total obedience to God, and total dependence on Him.
- **Non-conformity** – Do not give in to the pressures all around us.
- **Confidence** – In the Holy Spirit, who dwells within us to guide us into all truth.

“In a world of shifting values,
There are standards that remain,
I believe that holy living
By God’s grace we may attain.
All would hear the Holy Spirit
If they listen to His voice,
Every Christian may be Christ-like
And, in liberty, rejoice.”⁵

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⁵ John Gowans, *The Salvation Army Song Book*, Number 324, verse 3.