

Sermon for February 16, 2014 – Epiphany 6

Leviticus 19:1-2 (NIV84)

Theme: The Holiness God Requires. . .

- 1) *is something we can't perform.*
- 2) *is gift given to us in Christ.*
- 3) *is expressed through our deeds done from faith.*

The LORD said to Moses,² "Speak to the entire assembly of Israel and say to them: 'Be holy because I, the LORD your God, am holy. (Lev 19:1-2 NIV84)

Can you still be a Christian and willingly live in sin? For example, can you be a Christian and unrepentantly bear a grudge against a fellow believer? Can you be a Christian, and unrepentantly live together with someone outside of marriage, view pornography or be known as a great obscene joke teller? Can you be a Christian, and not take the clear opportunities God gives you to gather with fellow believers to study the Bible and partake of the Sacraments? Can you be a Christian while willingly planning to cheat on your taxes or defraud your neighbor? Can you be a Christian and willingly make fun of those who have disabilities or are of a different race; or bully and pick on other people? Can you be a Christian, and purposely not help people in need? Can you be a Christian and live with unrepentant hatred towards your enemies? The answer to all these questions is no, you cannot both be a Christian and live in any of the sins I mentioned, or that are mentioned anywhere in the Bible.

“But Pastor,” you might say, “the Bible says that we’re saved by grace through faith. Our works don’t save us – Jesus does. On top of this, no one is sinless. Even the great apostle Paul (in Romans chapter 7) laments that He constantly falls into sin. So how can you say that a person living in sin cannot be a Christian, when we are all sinful? Aren’t you condemning yourself too?”

My response is this: “You are absolutely right in saying that we are saved by grace through faith – that our works count for nothing. You are also right in saying everybody is sinful – even after they become Christian. But here’s the thing: Jesus did not save us so that we could willingly keep on sinning. He saved us to be his holy people. Yes, the apostle Paul was a sinner his whole life – just like everyone else. But the difference between Paul and the person “living in sin” is this: Paul did not want to sin, but the person living in sin does not want to stop sinning.

Brothers and sisters in Christ: The LORD is holy and he requires us to have the same holiness He himself has. Because this is true, let us take some time to learn about the **holiness God requires**, and how: 1) *It is something we cannot perform.* 2) *It is a gift given to us in Christ.* 3) *It is expressed through our deeds done in faith.*

Part One: It is something we cannot perform.

The LORD is holy, perfect and righteous; and He made man and woman in his image: perfect and holy. God does not change, but mankind has. When Adam and Eve sinned against God’s clear command, they were no longer holy: they no longer desired the good things God desired. Their nature had become corrupted. They became selfish and sinful – willing to hurt others to get ahead. Want proof that their nature was so corrupted? Just look at what their son Cain did to his brother Abel: he killed him out of jealousy.

Adam and Eve lost the holiness God created them with, and every human since them never had it. "*Flesh gives birth to flesh,*" the Bible says. (John 3:6, NIV84). We all have been born in the image of Adam. Desires of the flesh fill our heart. Even when we do good deeds, we mostly do them for the wrong reasons: that we can feel good about ourselves or that others will think we are good people and will like us; and not to the glory of God. Is it any wonder that the Bible says: *all our righteous acts are like filthy rags* (Isa 64:6 NIV84)?

Humanity has changed, but God has not. He is still perfectly holy and in his holiness he has to punish sin. So where does that leave us? Lost. We can't even begin to do the good God requires. It would be bad enough if God said, "Only your actions have to be holy," but the righteousness God demands goes further than that: he demands that our thoughts, yes even the inclinations of our heart, be holy and righteous at all times. And to make our situation worse, Jesus does not say: "Try your best." No, He says: "*Be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.*" (Matthew 5:48, NIV84) What does this mean? The Apostle James put it this way: *whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles at just one point is guilty of breaking all of it* (Jam 2:10 NIV84).

Brothers and sisters in Christ, if you want to see God and live forever in heaven, then you must be holy, as your heavenly father is holy. Anything less than 100% righteous means that you are going to hell. Well, that leaves is in quite the pickle doesn't it? We aren't even close to being 50% holy, let alone 100%. Where does that leave us? In need of a Savior. And our holy God is not only a God of justice; He is also love personified. And in love, He sent Jesus – His Son – to be our Savior. He sent Jesus to win for us the very righteousness we need to be save.

Part Two: It is a gift given to us in Christ.

This is why our Gospel lesson started out with Jesus saying: "*Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them.*" (Matthew 5:17, NIV84) In other words, Jesus came to win the holiness we need in order to stand before God. *God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.* (John 3:16 NIV84). Jesus fulfilled the law perfectly for us. He took our sins upon himself and suffered death for them all. *God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.* (2Co 5:21 NIV84). This righteousness is offered to all through the Gospel, but it is only received through faith.

What is faith? Saving faith is a God-given confidence that we are completely forgiven, righteous and holy because of Jesus' work for us. But, before one can believe he is forgiven, he has to realize (in sorrow) that he is a sinner who needs forgiveness. The first purpose of God's law is to lead us to this realization.

And once the law has led us to acknowledge our sinfulness and lament over our unrighteousness, the Holy Spirit then uses the Gospel to show us Jesus and how he saved us from our sins. Because of Jesus' work we stand forgiven before God. He covers us with His righteousness to such a degree that when God looks at us, He sees His Son whom he loves. Through baptism he adopts us into his family and washes us clean from all sin. Through faith He declares us holy in his sight; and this declaration is not merely regarding some future time when we will be in the sinless state of heaven. No, right now we are righteous before God. Right now, the LORD sees us as His sinless children. How can this be? Because every time God looks at those who believe in Him, He sees Jesus, his righteous Son.

The holiness that God requires, he freely gives to us as a gift through faith in Christ Jesus. Isn't this wonderful? We are free. We are innocent. We are holy and precious to God – even more holy than Adam

and Eve were before they fell into sin! How can that be? Because, through faith in Jesus, we have God's own righteousness covering us; we are his dear children. We are his holy people.

Part Three: It is expressed by our deeds done through faith.

Why did the LORD save us? Was it so that we can continue living for ourselves in sin? No, he saved us for a much more noble purpose. The apostle Paul tells us: *we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.* (Ephesians 2:10, NIV84)

God called us to faith so that we could be his holy children on this earth – glorifying His saving work to the people of this earth. He wants us to be different: to stand out in the world. He wants us to demonstrate what true righteousness is: living a life of love towards God and our fellow man.

Now, we have already said that in and of ourselves we can't perform the righteousness God requires. This is true. But remember, Jesus has covered us with his holiness. We are forgiven children of God because of His work for us, and this fact moves us to respond by living our lives to his glory. Because of Jesus work for us, we can confess with the Apostle Paul: *I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.* (Gal 2:20, NIV84)

The LORD says: *'Be holy because I, the LORD your God, am holy.'* This statement is more than just a mere command to "be holy." It tells us, rather, why we are holy. We are holy because the LORD is our Savior God who fulfilled all holiness for us. Jesus is the source of our righteousness.

And so as we walk through life, covered with Christ's holiness, we will want to do things that express this holiness. Why? Because, being God's dearly loved children, we want to express our gratitude and love to him. And what better way to do that than by avoiding the evil he wants us to avoid, and doing the good things He wants us to do.

Little children want to be like their parents. It's only natural. I see it in my own kids. They want to act like us, eat the same food we eat, dress in the same clothes, listen to the same music, etc. . . It is an expression of love and loyalty.

If this is true regarding sinful, little children, how much more true is this of God's forgiven, holy and dearly loved sons and daughters? This is why the apostle Paul once wrote: *Be imitators of God, therefore, as dearly loved children² and live a life of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.* (Ephesian 5:1-2 NIV84)

It is strange when little children did not want to be like their parents- if you saw them act the exact opposite of their folks. We would think something is wrong; and something is wrong when people who consider themselves "God's children" do not want to live the way God wants them to live. There is something wrong with that relationship.

And this is why it is impossible for someone to be a Christian and still live in sin. I am not saying that a Christian will be perfect – no, every Christian carries a sinful nature with him until the day he dies. But there is a difference between falling into sin, and living in it. Living in sin means that you treasure the sin more than God's command to stop. And if you treasure, love or follow something rather than the LORD, than it becomes your god. You forsake the purpose for which Christ saved you. You're unrepentant, and if you are unrepentant, you can't have faith. And if you don't have faith, you are not covered with Christ's righteousness. You are still in your sin and in danger of hell.

But if you repent and look to Jesus for forgiveness – striving to leave your life of sin in the process? Then know that you are forgiven for Christ’s sake – no matter how long you previously lived in sin. His sacrifice has washed you clean. You are God’s holy child. And being his child, you will naturally want to thank the LORD by leaving your life of sin and leading a holy life to God’s glory. True, you will still sin and struggle with it until the day you die. The difference is that, instead of looking forward to sin, you will lament over it and earnestly seek Christ’s help to overcome it.

Brothers and sisters in Christ. The LORD has saved you – not so that you can continue living selfishly, but rather to be His holy people– expressing His love on this earth by pointing to Jesus with both your words and actions. Be holy – for this is what you already are through faith in Christ Jesus, and through your deeds done out of faith in Christ, your heavenly Father is glorified. Amen