



THE NEW SHOFAR

WARNING: *this is what God demands of all of us:*

You must be holy as I am holy

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When the word holiness is used, it unfortunately conjures up for many, images of stern preachers wagging their fingers and speaking of damnation. It is all the more difficult when we read biblical passages such as this one in **1 Peter**: *Be holy because I am holy*. Given it is in the imperative form, it is meant to be a command we dare not ignore.

Holiness is about God: Clearly, holiness is something that defines God (*I am holy*). If we are to *be holy* then that holiness is going to involve something of a sharing in the life of God. But there is more! For God, our *holiness* is of such great importance to Him that He commands us to *be holy!* We have to *be holy* in the way *God is holy*

The prophet Isaiah was blessed with a vision of God's holiness (**6:1-7**) and he tried to convey his experiences to us. In it, the angels were calling to each other...*Holy, holy, holy is Yahweh Almighty; the whole earth is full of his glory.*' Faced with such overwhelming holiness, Isaiah fell to the ground and declared his unworthiness and sinfulness. Similarly, faced with such holiness, the true believer would do nothing less. Isaiah senses how completely "other" and totally above and beyond human beings God is. He is perfect, pure, without any stain, therefore He is above us for we are all flawed.

What holiness is not: Paul in Romans reminds us of what composes a life of unholiness - *Those who lie, cheat, steal, deceive, hold onto anger, abuse others – no one who does these things is holy: Romans 1:18-32*. Note how these are not among what we might be tempted to call lesser sins but Paul goes on to indicate how these are all a part of broader human failures and all represent a rejection of God... *Such people are full of envy," he wrote, "murder, strife, deceit, and malice. They are gossips, slanderers, God-haters, insolent, arrogant, and boastful; inventing ways of doing evil; they disobey their parents; they have no understanding, no fidelity, no love, no mercy."* Earlier in this chapter, he wrote of idolatry and sexual immorality. Few of us could say, in all honesty, we are not somewhere in that list. Thus, none of us are holy. Not one of us is meeting the command of God to *be holy as I am holy*.

What then is holiness? How do we begin the pursuit of holiness? The starting point must always be Jesus. If we want to understand holiness we need to look at Jesus.

When we search through scripture for verses on holiness – what is holiness in the eyes of God – we can find many and few more life challenging than the well know text from Micah - *"He has shown you, O mortal, what is good. And what does the Lord require*

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of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God (6:8). What is important is the way the prophet brings this down into our day to day living in the world and removes it from the Temple worship. God wants us to be just and fair. God wants us to be just and fair to each other. Pay our debts. Charge fair prices. Don't bear false witness against others. Don't lie. **But** He also wants us to **Love** mercy – helping the poor, the needy, the lonely, the forgotten, including with our money. **And finally**, God sees holiness as keeping up a constant “walk” with Him in which we are humble. In the New Testament James writes in a similar vein...*Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world.” (1:17).* Holiness requires a reaching out into the world with Jesus as He reaches out through us.

Holiness does not mean that we are perfect. Holiness does not mean that we are sinless. Holiness means possessing the habit of beginning again, of acknowledging our need for forgiveness, seeking repentance and then beginning again our daily walk with the Lord. And what happens is that this habit of beginning again, this habit of asking for and receiving God's forgiveness every day, eventually becomes stronger than our sinful habits. As we begin again and again, the capacity of our hearts to receive God's forgiveness and to live in friendship with Him expands. We begin to desire God more than we desire sin. Holiness grows out of our persevering in our openness to grace and striving to better imitate the Way of Jesus the Christ. The more faithfully we do that, the more we take into ourselves the holiness that is His.

We are all called to take up the quest for holiness: But we need to understand what true holiness is. It is not about things we perform, things we do, prayers we say and liturgies we attend. Holiness is not perfection; holiness is our growing capacity for conversion and a daily deepening of our friendship with God. **Thus**, *holiness is not a destination. It's a choice of how we do the things we do every day.*

The only work necessary on our part is to desire God's will and to cooperate with His grace. Both of these things are attested to by Jesus during His agony in the garden of Gethsemane. There He put God's will before His own, knowing that it meant His suffering and death for the salvation of the world. The angels ministered to Jesus. God was with Him. The same is true for us. We are destined to the same path as Jesus: death, resurrection, and perfection. We are made in the image and likeness of God. But there is something holding us back, keeping us from becoming what we were made to be. Grace is God's life and love that He freely offers to us should we be willing to receive it. Grace is like the boost we need to be able to make the journey towards sainthood. We can't do it on our own. We need His help. Acknowledging that and asking for it is a big step in the journey.

St. Therese of Lisieux: *The knowledge that it was impossible to do anything of myself rendered my task easier.* ~ **St. Francis of Assisi:** *Start by doing what's necessary; then do what's possible; and suddenly you are doing the impossible.* Holiness of life is not easy, but it *is* a requirement for life with God. It is our primary vocation. But we know what is required of us: repent; believe; follow and then God makes us holy.