

¹ After these things had been done, the leaders came to me and said, “The people of Israel, including the priests and the Levites, have not kept themselves separate from the neighboring peoples with their detestable practices, like those of the Canaanites, Hittites, Perizzites, Jebusites, Ammonites, Moabites, Egyptians and Amorites. ² They have taken some of their daughters as wives for themselves and their sons, and have mingled the holy race with the peoples around them. And the leaders and officials have led the way in this unfaithfulness.”

³ When I heard this, I tore my tunic and cloak, pulled hair from my head and beard and sat down appalled. ⁴ Then everyone who trembled at the words of the God of Israel gathered around me because of this unfaithfulness of the exiles. And I sat there appalled until the evening sacrifice.

⁵ Then, at the evening sacrifice, I rose from my self-abasement, with my tunic and cloak torn, and fell on my knees with my hands spread out to the LORD my God ⁶ and prayed:

“I am too ashamed and disgraced, my God, to lift up my face to you, because our sins are higher than our heads and our guilt has reached to the heavens. ⁷ From the days of our ancestors until now, our guilt has been great. Because of our sins, we and our kings and our priests have been subjected to the sword and captivity, to pillage and humiliation at the hand of foreign kings, as it is today.

⁸ “But now, for a brief moment, the LORD our God has been gracious in leaving us a remnant and giving us a firm place^[a] in his sanctuary, and so our God gives light to our eyes and a little relief in our bondage. ⁹ Though we are slaves, our God has not forsaken us in our bondage. He has shown us kindness in the sight of the kings of Persia: He has granted us new life to rebuild the house of our God and repair its ruins, and he has given us a wall of protection in Judah and Jerusalem.

¹⁰ “But now, our God, what can we say after this? For we have forsaken the commands ¹¹ you gave through your servants the prophets when you said: ‘The land you are entering to possess is a land polluted by the corruption of its peoples. By their detestable practices they have filled it with their impurity from one end to the other. ¹² Therefore, do not give your daughters in marriage to their sons or take their daughters for your sons. Do not seek a treaty of friendship with them at any time, that you may be strong and eat the good things of the land and leave it to your children as an everlasting inheritance.’

¹³ “What has happened to us is a result of our evil deeds and our great guilt, and yet, our God, you have punished us less than our sins deserved and have given us a remnant like this. ¹⁴ Shall we then break your commands again and intermarry with the peoples who commit such detestable practices? Would you not be angry enough with us to destroy us, leaving us no remnant or survivor? ¹⁵ LORD, the God of Israel, you are righteous! We are left this day as a remnant. Here we are before you in our guilt, though because of it not one of us can stand in your presence.”

-- Ezra 9

When we read passages like Ezra 9, what tends to jump out at us are the ways in which God is described: “Angry”. “Destroy”. “Righteous”. “Holy.” When we read of God’s prohibition against Israel’s people intermarrying with the surrounding tribes, we think of the damage racism has done to our world and how far we’ve come from seeing interracial marriage as weird or even forbidden. If we were to read this chapter of Ezra alone and out of context with the rest of the Bible, we would think that this purebred priest speaks of a wrathful, racist God who spans people into submitting to some obscure divine agenda. It’s a picture of God we’re uncomfortable with because we prefer God to be someone of our own imagining. Most of us would prefer a permissive God who lets us do what we want and smiles on us as we crash about his Creation and ruin his work. But a permissive God is not a loving God, and an unloving God is not a holy God.

Israel was never to be a self-contained empire that dominated the world like Macedonia or Rome or the Mongols. Israel did not exist for its own glory and national pride. Rather, the fundamental reason for Ancient Israel’s existence was that they were to bear witness to the one who set them up in a rich land overflowing with milk and honey. There was no other purpose for their being made into a nation than to show who this God, this Yahweh is. Israel was to be a light in the world, living together in loving justice with each other as a matter of telling the nations about the character of the God they worshipped. And of all the things that their quirky lifestyle suggested, what was the one characteristic of Yahweh that Israel’s worship implied? Was it only that God is love? Was it only that God is good? Did Israel’s worship and life together only reflect God’s concern for the poor and marginalized?

No, Israel’s call to be a Yahweh-worshipping community did not stop at chanting “God is great and God is good”, but something far better: God is *holy*. Whatever Israel was to declare to the nations about God, they were to say that the god they worshipped is different, separate, *holy*.

I don't know about you, but whenever I hear that phrase, that "God is holy", I get a little antsy. "Holiness" implies a kind of untouchability, a sort of purity and moral uprightness that I simply don't have. Dwelling on the holiness of God doesn't draw me—nor likely does it draw you—into deeper love and affection for him. Loving a holy God feels a bit like I'm being asked to love a diamond: sparkly and perfect, but also hard and unyielding. Yet our difficulty with God's holiness isn't because *he's* the problem, it's because we don't have a working definition of holiness that includes love and goodness. Yet the love and compassion of God is inseparable from his holy nature.

When we think of a holy God, we tend to think of moral perfection, that God can do no wrong. And we'd be right! However, the holiness of God doesn't stop there, because if all the holiness of this God meant was that we needed to get ourselves in shape and match up to his set-apartness, we're all sunk. If this is all that is meant when the Bible proclaims "God is holy", then the oft-repeated command that "we be holy as God is holy"¹ sounds like an impossible standard set by an angry God. Many of us grew up with the idea that a holy God could not be a loving God, and this is a narrative that we in this church are trying hard to address by saying that it is *because* God is holy that he is loving and good.

Think of it this way: if God is without moral blemish, if he is *holy*, he is necessarily *good*, even if philosophers mutter into their long beards about what goodness means. I may be oversimplifying when I say so, but despite all the talk about "goodness" being relative, there is very likely a sense of what is good and what is not that every culture has always adhered to. One conception of what it means to be "good" is that we hope for and will the best for others. This is precisely what God's goodness is about—not that he just enjoys his own goodness, but that he hopes that we become all

¹ Lev 19:2, and elsewhere

that we are meant to become as his beloved children. And God's hope for us is that we enjoy our renewed life in him, the best life there is.

Now, we like hearing about the love of God, but out of his essential holiness also comes his goodness—and out of his desire for goodness comes his wrath, the thing we don't much like talking about. We usually don't mind a conception of a God who is angry with all that is wrong in the world—war, famine, and slavery to name a few—but we *do* mind a God who is angry with all that is wrong in *us*. Too bad. In order to address what is wrong with the world, God needs to address what is wrong in us, because what is wrong in *us* is what is causing what is wrong in the world.

So since the goodness of God flows out of his moral uprightness, his holiness, where God's holiness touches us is that no truly good God could ever tolerate rampant evil. We can't have both a God who loves and a God who doesn't care—the two are inseparable.

In order to put things in the world to rights, his great strategy is to work with us in restoring everything, a process we call redemption. And the people he works with is none other than those who willingly place themselves in relationship with the Father through the Son and are sanctified (made holy) and empowered by the Spirit of God within.

The choosing of a people group to be his light in the world to every nation was God's idea all along. It's why he makes a covenant with Abraham, it's why he renews this covenant with David, and it's why he makes promises to the remnant of Israel through prophets like Zechariah and Malachi. However, in order to express God's holiness, the people must also be made holy—and this is where the definition of holiness shifts.

A holy object was something set aside for special use in Israel's worship. All the articles in the Tent of Meeting and later, the Temple, were set aside for one purpose only: to handle the worship of Yahweh's people. Now when God tells his people to be *holy*, he is not just saying they need to live

up to his standards of moral perfection. He already *knows* they can't. This is why he repeats again and again in Scripture that *he* is the one who makes his people holy.² Not only are God's people to take on his character of moral uprightness, but we, like the things of the Temple, are holy in that we are set apart for special purposes. This is the first hurdle of becoming holy: that we resolutely set ourselves aside for God and become consecrated to him.

This all intersects with Ezra in that the process of God making his people set-apart, different, counter-cultural, *holy*, is that we are to cooperate with the Spirit of God in it. The effort of holiness is when we decide that what God holds out for us is better than what we imagine for ourselves. The problem that Israel encountered was that they had failed to clear the first hurdle of holiness—to set themselves apart. Maybe it doesn't sound like such a big deal to you that the Israelites intermarried with surrounding tribes, but the problem wasn't as simple as just marrying someone their dad didn't like. The problem with these marriages was that the people who were defined as a nation by virtue of their singleminded devotion to Yahweh were now in danger of losing this devotion. When you marry, you take on much of the worldview and customs of your spouse's family. The fundamental problem with Israel's intermarriage was that the worldviews and beliefs of their neighbours were incompatible with the way God calls his people. Unlike a mixture of oil and water, a mixture of beliefs can't be separated so cleanly. When Israel began mixing their faiths with those around them, this led to a pollution of their own faith and a lessening of who they were meant to be.³ Their witness to the world around them became confused, and as a result, the world's image of God came out jumbled and unrealistic.

² Ex 31:13 and others

³ much of the objectionable nature of Canaanite religious practices had to do with their sexual ethics (Lev 18)

Ezra grieves these intermarriages because they muddled what Israel was speaking to the world. The way they treated the Temple, its instruments, and the rituals of worship all said “Yahweh is holy”, but the way their own lives reflected God’s holiness said the complete opposite. You see, the expression of God’s holy character through his people was never meant to be compartmentalized away from the lives of the people. Israel was not to be a nation of Saturday Jews with a few religious barbecues thrown in for good measure. No, Israel’s representation of God came from everyday life and spoke of how they were set apart and *different* from other peoples because of their holy God.

It may seem incredibly harsh that the solution recorded in Ezra is to have all the wives and children of these intertribal marriages sent away. But what was at stake was nothing less than Israel’s entire reason for being, and even more, the mission of God himself.

Ezra was sent to Israel by the Persian emperor to rebuild the Temple and restore Israel. Much later, Jesus proclaims that the Temple Ezra built and Herod renovated would be destroyed and then by his hand, rebuilt in three days. We know now that Jesus wasn’t talking about the physical Temple, but the reconstruction of the place where God dwells. We may think that God wanted to dwell in a pretty box on top of a hill, but God had always intended for his dwelling place to be among the world’s people. It’s in this way that God makes a holy people: not by demanding that they live up to an impossible standard of conduct, but that he dwells with them, making them holy by his presence.

Peter picks up on this theme in the New Testament when he writes “*But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s special possession, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light.*”⁴ If you didn’t already know, Peter wasn’t writing to a physical building, but to all those who follow Christ, the Church as a whole. God makes us holy by his willingness to dwell with us, and when we become holy, we are set apart for

⁴ 2 Peter 2:9

God's redeeming mission in his dawning Kingdom. We are God's holy people called out of darkness and into the light not for our own good alone, but so *that* we may declare our wonder at this holy God who calls us to everlasting life.

The elephant in the room, however, is the question of how our witness as God's holy nation is compromised by the way we live individually. The choices we make as individuals have a great deal to do with how the Church, the new people of God, tells the world *about* God. Whether we choose certain relationships as more important than pursuing Christ or certain stations in life as more important than following him, any time we are not actively seeking to follow Jesus in every aspect of our lives, we are *not* living out our identities as Kingdom citizens. For the people of Ezra's time, it was the lure of marriage and home life that held them back. To us, Jesus speaks and says "*Anyone who loves their father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; anyone who loves their son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me. Whoever does not take up their cross and follow me is not worthy of me. Whoever finds their life will lose it, and whoever loses their life for my sake will find it.*"⁵ Much of the faith you and I will have to exercise is in the promise of Jesus that as we give ourselves to God, we are given our selves back.

In order for the Church to have integrity in its witness to the world, the people who make up the Church must also live with integrity. Does this mean simply practicing what we preach? Yes, integrity demands that we do. However what is deeper and more challenging is that we live as aliens and strangers to a world that does not know the living God. When you and I started the pilgrimage of faith by putting ourselves in Christ, not only did we ourselves become new⁶, but everything around us became new and unfamiliar. Though we have lived in this world all our lives, when we fix our eyes on Jesus, it's as though we are all new immigrants. No longer are the customs of the world our customs,

⁵ Matt 10:37-39

⁶ 2 Cor 5:17

nor the things around which the world revolves the things on which we set our hearts. Rather, we are innocent to all the vain things that charm others most. This is what God meant when he asked us to “be holy”—not that we could ever become morally perfect on this side of death, but that we undergo a real repentance, a change in the way we think and feel and decide.

The deepest integrity of the Christian life is one of surrendering to the lordship of Christ in every sphere of our lives. You and I are used to living with different roles: “this is work, this is home, this is when we are a husband, this is when we are a mom.” Yet as we give our entire lives over to Jesus, he goes about reconnecting these spheres so that we are led out of disintegration and into integrity. We aren’t left as people who occasionally believe certain things, but in every place and every time, we are Christ’s own. This is the *shalom* of Yahweh—peace, but also *wholeness*, completion. In Jesus, we are to no longer live with disconnected compartments. We are no longer to say “this is Sunday morning, this is Wednesday evening, this is my ten percent, this is my ten minutes”. Now, we say “all I am and all I have is Yours.” This was the message Israel’s existence was supposed to make, and now, it is ours.

1.) How does God’s “difference” (i.e.: his holiness) work itself out in your life?