

If You Think It's Just a Set of Rules, You May Be Surprised

by Ruth E. Van Reken

Holiness. What a strange word. Sounds a little fanatical. What does it even mean? As a teenager, I would have answered that question, "No dancing, no drinking, no movies. Read your Bible in the morning, pray every day, and you'll be fine. The rules are clear. Keep them and thou shalt be pronounced holy."

My idea of holiness, however, didn't stay that simple. During my twenties, I saw many of those rules for "How to Be the World's Best Christian" cited as examples of legalism by fellow Christians. After all, didn't King David dance before God (2 Samuel 6:14)? And didn't Jesus turn water to wine at a wedding (John 2:1-11)? As I began to consider these things, my perspective on holiness started to change.

For example, as a young mom, I felt relieved to learn God didn't require a specific time for devotions, such as first thing in the morning. With my new freedom I soon went from feeling guilty if I missed my morning quiet time to often going to bed without having spent any time with God that day. How easy it was to slide from legalism to license!

Yet, in the midst of my liberation, unease gnawed at my soul. If holiness only meant keeping certain rules and now the rules were gone, was the idea of holiness extinct? If not, what did it mean to be holy without being legalistic? Was such a thing possible?

I asked my wise friend Barb her thoughts on holiness. Barb instantly replied, "It attracts me like a magnet." I was shocked. This obviously hadn't been my picture of the word. When I asked her why, she replied, "Because it's so beautiful. Holiness shines in the darkness to remind us of how things should have been and what they will be one day."

Back to square one for me! If holiness was indeed beautiful (as Psalm 29:2 also says) rather than oppressive (as I'd thought), I needed to ask God for fresh eyes to see it.

First Peter 1:16 says I'm to be holy as God's holy. If holiness relates to purity and being set apart, how could I achieve it? May-be the strict rules of my past were correct after all. But returning to them didn't feel like the right answer. Scripture clearly teaches that I *am* to live a life distinct from the world (James 4:4). But such a life is far different than keeping a few rules. Why?

First, holiness starts with God—not me. I enter the realm of holiness by accepting Jesus as my Savior. In this process, God not only forgives my sin (John 1:29), but he tells me I've been bought with a price—the precious blood of Jesus (1 Corinthians 6:20). God set me apart for himself and moves me from the world's kingdom into his kingdom (John 3:5).

But then there's *my* part in the "holiness plan." While true holiness originates with God, he asks for my response as well. Initially I'm asked to receive God's grace through faith in Jesus Christ (John 3:16-17). But that's not all. My actions matter. God wants me to live a pure life according to *his* standards. Why? Because as his follower, I represent God to those who don't yet know him. God designed his kingdom—made up of his followers—to reflect his character. For instance, while the world says to curse my enemies, God instructs me to bless them because his character consists of blessing people. He declares that greatness is found in servanthood, not in human power. God says my body's his temple, and I'm not to use it for immorality. His principles for how I'm to live are clear and definite, but most significantly—and surprisingly—they aren't specific rules for every possible situation.

That takes me back to my first question. If holiness isn't about following a group of specific rules, but it does relate to my behavior, what's the practical difference between holiness and legalism?

Holiness calls me to live by faith, not by sight. Because God gives us principles rather than specific rules for living a holy life, his kingdom can be lived in some measure here on earth in all generations, in all cultures, in all times. How these eternal principles are applied will look different in

each circumstance, but God's *principles* never change. One person may be a vegetarian, for example, while another eats meat, yet both honor God (Romans 14:2-3). To live a holy life means I must constantly go back to God for direction on how to live out these principles.

Legalism, however, occurs whenever a legitimate application of a certain principle is turned into an absolute. Soon this rule replaces the principle itself and one of two things usually happens. First, those who faithfully follow the rule can become self-righteous, easily forgetting to consider further applications of the underlying principle. For example, Philippians 4:8 tells us to think on whatever things are true, lovely, admirable, or pure. As a teenager I didn't attend movies in the theater lest I violate that principle, but I conveniently overlooked how some tv shows and books could feed my mind with far more impurity than certain movies might.

On the other hand, when the legalistic rules themselves are exposed as the non-absolutes they are, it's easy to believe that there are no absolutes. Not only is the legalism discarded as irrelevant, but the eternal principle initially behind it is often discarded as well. Take the "no dancing" edict of my high-school days. It began as an attempt to help us follow scriptural injunctions to avoid sexual temptation. When the rule was tossed, it became easy to forget that God's command to flee sexual immorality (1 Corinthians 6:18) still stands—forever. Once God's absolutes are ignored, our liberty quickly turns into license. We become so proud of not being legalistic, we forget to wonder if we're being obedient.

Being holy isn't always easy. God often exposes an area in my life in which I still hide sin. He shows me I need to repent. Other times holiness is liberating. Because this is about life in God's kingdom, not mine, I can afford to forgive those who have wounded me, to share with those who can never repay, and to overcome evil with good. As a Christian, my job is to be obedient, while God's job is to figure out the rest.

My friend Barb (and the psalmist!) are right. There is beauty in holiness. It's the beauty of seeing God's kingdom grow here on earth as God's followers live out his intended plan. In that process, living a holy life makes us the light that shines in the darkness and the salt to preserve the good (Matthew 5:13-16). Holiness is important and relevant. And it still matters in our world today.

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