

Article #3: Faithful Obedience

The people of God are holy first of all because God has called us to exist in relation to God. As the Old Testament puts it, we are God's "treasured possession" (Exodus 19:5). To be holy is to be drawn into this relation of unusual intimacy. But to this call of God we must respond with a life of consecration, which is a second aspect of holiness. Both aspects are necessary for the holy life. While consecration presupposes and is a response to God's call upon us, God's call alone is not sufficient for holiness. Many ignore God's sanctifying call and thus fail to enter into the holy life.

These two aspects of holiness, call and consecration, relates to our status in relation to God. Through God's call and our consecration to God we have been drawn into a special relation in which we are God's possession and are dedicated to God's exclusive service. We have been spiritually transferred from the fallen world into presence of God. Through the Holy Spirit, we have been introduced into the fellowship between the Father and the Son.

But we would have a very mistaken view of holiness if we thought of it only in terms of our standing in this relationship. Like our other relationships in life—relationships of love and friendship and business—our relation to God would be highly superficial if it were not joined to concrete deeds. Because of this, it is important to note that a third vital aspect of holiness pertains to our conduct in faithful and obedient response to God's command. The biblical word for this conduct is righteousness.

Leviticus 19 shows us the connection between holiness and righteousness. It begins by noting that Israel is to be holy because God is holy (19:2). But this does mean only that Israel stands in a special relation to God. Sadly, the history of Israel shows that Israelites often took their holiness to mean only that they enjoyed this special relation to God. They forgot that holiness means also that Israel has obligations that it must fulfill because it is holy. These obligations include revering parents and keeping the Sabbath (19:3), turning away from the worship of images (19:4), providing for the poor (19:9-10), avoiding stealing and lying (19:11) and so on. Perhaps the greatest mistake that God's people can make is to believe that holiness is only about their status as God's people and to think that they possess a holiness without obligation. The truth is that there is an essential connection between holiness and righteous deeds.

It is important to remember that these acts of righteousness alone did not make Israel holy. Israel's holiness rested first of all on God's call. But these acts, along with acts of consecration, were the faithful response to God that God required if Israel was to be the holy people that God intended. Although deeds do not in themselves make us holy, there is no holiness without these deeds.

Why are righteous deeds an essential part of holiness? The answer is that Israel could not stand in relation to God without coming to have God's character, which is not only holiness but also righteousness. That meant not only that Israel had to maintain itself in a state of purity, but also that Israel had to share God's concerns for justice, for equitable treatment of the powerless, and for right conduct in every sphere of life. To the extent that Israel failed to conform itself to God's righteous character, its relation to the holy God was threatened.

1 Peter states succinctly the implications of Leviticus 19: "Do not be conformed to the desires that you formerly had in ignorance. Instead, as he who called you is holy, be holy yourselves in all your conduct" (1:14-15). These verses shows us, first, that our holiness is grounded in God's call and,

second, that holiness must issue forth in righteousness—“be holy yourselves *in all your conduct*.” This passage also helps us see the nature of righteousness. Negatively stated, righteousness is resisting the world and its evil desires (“Do not be conformed to the desires that you formerly had in ignorance”). Positively stated, righteousness is being holy, as God is holy, in every aspect of our conduct.

But if we affirm that holiness requires faithful obedience in the form of righteous acts, aren't we in danger of saying that we are saved by works? Doesn't holiness become a human accomplishment?

There are two reasons why the answer to these questions is no. First, as already noted, our holiness and righteousness are grounded in God's call upon us. Anything we do is a response to God's prior movement toward us. The theological term for this movement of God toward us is grace.

Righteousness is possible only because of God's grace. Second, whatever we do in the way of righteousness is the effect of God working within us. As Paul stated, “It is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for his good pleasure” (Philippians 2:13).

Paul explained this important point further when he spoke about “the obedience of faith” (Romans 16:26). This phrase (“the obedience of faith”) says two things. First, it says that faith in Jesus Christ is an act of obedience to God. Faith is not merely believing something. It is also an act of trust and submission to God. Abraham is our example in this matter. In obedience to God, he believed and trusted in God's promises. He obedient response to God was an act of righteousness (Romans 4:18-22). Second, it says that our continued obedience to God flows from faith. That is to say, our righteous deeds are characterized as acts of faithfulness to God. The Thessalonians provide us an example. Paul described their turning away from idols and their subsequent faithfulness to God as their “work of faith” (1 Thessalonians 1:3). We are on the right track if we see all of our righteous acts as the result of our commitment to live faithfully to God. Faith, then, is an act of obedience and faithfulness to God. It sums up the totality of our response to God's call and God's grace.

Jesus Christ is the paradigm of faithful obedience to God. Jesus is the one human being in history who obeyed God to the uttermost and in an exemplary way. But he is a model for us precisely because he was human—after all, a righteous being who was only divine and not human would not be a helpful example for us. Jesus Christ is the incarnation of the eternal Son, but nonetheless as a human being he had to learn obedience through suffering, just as we all do (Hebrews 5:8). And yet, he displayed perfect obedient, even to the point of death, without bitterness or hatred or grudging reluctance. In other words, he not only fulfilled his Father's commands but also did so as an act of faithful response to God. In this way, Jesus is the ultimate and unsurpassable example of life in the Spirit. Those who live and walk in the Spirit fulfill the requirements of God's law (Romans 8:4) but, like Jesus, do not experience that law as a burden or an obligation. On the contrary, they affirm with Jesus that their food is to do the will of God (John 4:34). For those who walk in the Spirit, acts of righteousness are not so much the fulfillment of an obligation as they are the faithful response of God's children to God's kindness and grace.

Holiness, then, signifies several things, including God's call and our consecrating response. It also includes our obedient and faithful answer to God's call in the form of a righteous life of good works. Because God's life is a life of holiness and righteousness, there is no higher existence for us than, in the words of Paul, to become “imitators of God” (Ephesians 5:1) by entering into this life of holiness.