

Where's the Balance Between God's Love and God's Holiness?

Years ago I was preaching a series of strong holiness messages in a particular church. After one of the meetings the pastor said something to me that I've never forgotten. "The Lord has dealt with me about preaching more on love than holiness," he said.

That statement didn't sit well with me. I knew it was not accurate. Yet back then I didn't know why. I pondered that pastor's statement with my own thoughts that raced through my head. Is love more important than holiness? Are they different, or are they virtually the same? They have to be different, or we'd have a lot of redundancy in the Bible, I thought. But how are they different? Although I knew the pastor's statement came from a lack of understanding true holiness, at that time I couldn't thoroughly explain the difference.

This pastor's statement put an emphasis on love, which is of primary importance, while de-emphasizing holiness, which is not only God's greatest attribute, but foundational to understanding man's relationship to God. I walked away from that conversation knowing that this pastor's view of holiness was not becoming or beautiful. I thought of how his view was probably shared by a multitude of believers, who have formed erroneous ideas and notions of holiness, due probably to their own negative experiences—like the cat who is afraid of water because of one negative experience of getting scalded by boiling water. Or of those who may have come from a background of legalism where do's and don'ts were associated with holiness. These are among the reasons holiness has gotten a bad rap and is looked upon with a sort of disdain, as being

primitive, outdated and just not culturally relevant. We need to realize, however, that negative experiences or unsound teaching does not nullify the real meaning, necessity and beauty of God's holiness.

What then is the real meaning of holiness? Holiness is the likeness of God. It is the total summation of all His attributes. One of my favorite definitions of holiness as it applies to believers is that it is a moral dedication and a life committed to purity of thought, word, motive and deed. At the center of that definition is the fact of being set apart or consecrated to God's purposes. Just as God is otherworldly, we as His chosen people are to be distinct and set apart from this world. In other words, we are not to be conformed to its ideals, patterns or standards. Holiness is conformity to God's nature and will.

But even more importantly, holiness has more to do with to whom we belong. To whom do we give our loyalty, love, and allegiance? To be holy means that all we are and all we have belongs to God, not ourselves, and is set apart for His purposes. It means that every aspect of our lives is to be shaped and directed by God. Walking in holiness causes every component of our character to stand God's inspection and meet His approval.

Personally, I believe that restoring the beauty of biblical holiness in the church is a critical ingredient to healing the moral confusion in our culture. As the church goes, so goes the world. Our disproportionate view of holiness is one of the big reasons there is so much of the spirit of the world in the church. A distorted view of holiness, or simply the ignorance of it, is clouding our understanding of God's true love. When God is seen as a loving, nondemanding pushover whose love overrides His holiness, then people will live in accordance with that belief. Permissiveness and promiscuity will be prevalent.

For example, if a person believes that God is so loving that He would never send anyone to hell for their sin, then their conduct will reflect that belief, and much of their life will be lived with that awful presumption. Popular false concepts of God such as these are spreading rampantly in much of the Western culture. A vision and revelation of God's holiness will alter any of these false perceptions and will serve to greatly strengthen the church.

Any understanding of sin must begin with an understanding of true biblical holiness. In Canaan the temple prostitute was considered a holy woman, and a homosexual priest was considered a holy man. However, what was accepted among the Canaanites and the other nations was an abomination to God (Deut. 23:17-18). And Israel, as God's chosen nation, a type of the New Testament church, was forbidden to practice these things. The people of Canaan didn't understand God's holiness so they couldn't possibly understand the gravity of their sin.

A person defines sin by his own concept of God. This is the reason we now have books being written that one can be a gay Christian; and now we also have the spread of universalism and the emergent church that teaches that in the end all will be saved, because God will not allow any human being to go to hell. Many do not understand God's love because they are not seeing it through His holiness.

Our understanding of God's holiness determines our estimation of sin. God defines Himself through His holiness. His holiness is the standard by which we judge what sin is and what sin is not. Righteousness and justice, which are vital aspects of God's holiness, are the foundation of His throne (Ps 89:14). All God's dealings with us are based on the foundation of holiness. *Nevertheless the solid foundation of God stands, having this seal: "The Lord knows those who are His," and, "Let everyone who names the name of Christ depart from iniquity"* (2 Tim 2:19).

It is wrong to elevate what we think is love at the expense of holiness. In fact, God's true love manifests within holiness. Just as water flows through a pipe the love of God flows through His holiness. Moreover, it is God's love that keeps Him from overlooking His holiness. After all, it was His holiness which made the atonement necessary. His holiness demanded the cost of God's own Son, for He cannot excuse, acquit or clear the guilty (Ex 34:7). And what His holiness demanded His love provided on the cross of Calvary.

Holiness and love are not at odds with each other. Holiness is not in opposition to love or separated from it. The Bible tells us that love is the greatest (1 Cor. 13:13) and any word, motivation or act void of love is as nothing (1 Cor. 13:1-3). But at the same time, love is not separated from holiness. Rather, it is constrained by holiness.

For example, if a church will not draw a sharp distinction between sin and righteousness, or will not practice church discipline among its members as taught in the Word (Mat. 18:15-17, Rom. 16:17, 1 Cor. 5, Tit. 3:10, 2 Thes. 3:6, 14-15, and such) because in their minds, it doesn't seem loving, has probably been deceived into a false view of love absorbed from the pop culture. On the other hand, a church that emphasizes holiness, yet fails to do so in the motivation and service of love is a church that does not understand God's holiness.

The true love of God is fixed on God's holiness. If a church does not abide in holiness, it does not abide in true love. Conversely, if it does not abide in true love, it does not abide in holiness.

A holy church is *in* the world but not *of* it. They abstain from sin while dwelling among sinners—both are characteristics of true holiness. The problem has been that some churches have swerved too far in one direction or too far in the other, waffling between a false view of holiness and a false view of love.

The same Bible that tells me to pursue love (1 Cor 14:1) tells me to pursue holiness (Heb 12:14). Without love we are nothing. Without holiness we will never see the Lord.

It's time for the modern day church to get that right and walk in that light.

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