



KNU International English Church

A LOVING COMMUNITY THAT CHANGES OUR WORLD.

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Holiness

Nazarene Heritage Series - Week 1

Isaiah 6:1-8, John 17:13-26, Galatians 5:13-25

I grew up hating holiness. I hated hearing about it. I hated singing about it. I hated talking about it. I hated everything about holiness.

That was a problem - especially for someone in the Church of the Nazarene, which is a “holiness denomination.” We talked about holiness a lot. We preached about it. We sang about it. We talked about it in Sunday School. But I hated it.

Then, I went to MidAmerica Nazarene University, and I discovered that I was not alone. “Doctrine of Holiness” was required for all ministry students, and it was one of the students’ least favorite classes - right behind “History and Polity of the Church of the Nazarene.” When special preachers came and did revival services and talked about holiness and entire sanctification, we felt this awkward tension between wanting to stand up and argue and wanting to run to the altar and repent and pray -- again -- for the hundredth time. Any time “Holiness unto the Lord” was sung, we cringed inside and kind of turned to our neighbors with an uncomfortable smirk, like “There they go again.” We might even swing our arms in mock joy (“Sing it, shout it, loud and long”), while inside we were scoffing at such an overplayed and under-lived song on an over-preached subject.

What’s the deal? Why all the resistance? Why all the bitter feelings? Why on earth would future pastors not want to talk about being holy? And if the theology majors didn’t want to talk about holiness, you know everyone else was either clueless or hostile. What happened?

Well, that’s a long story ... but here’s a short answer. The Church of the Nazarene was born out of the revival movement in North America in the late 1800’s. After 50 years, we had institutionalized that revival into church structures and theological formulas. After another 50 years, we had lost the revival, and we were trying to regain it through the theological formulas. We thought that if we could just preach our holiness theology right enough, long enough, and loud enough, then we could return to the great revival days that started our movement. That didn’t work. Instead, it seems like each generation got a little more confused and frustrated.

If you grew up Nazarene, you probably know what I’m talking about. Either you’ve had these feelings, or you know someone who has. Our whole denomination is in the midst of a long struggle to gain a fresh understanding of ourselves and our theology. We’ll probably be working at this for another 20-30 years.

If you didn't grow up Nazarene, this whole discussion is probably new to you. That's OK, too. No matter what your tradition, holiness is one of the most important ideas in the Bible, so you won't be lost, and this is still important for all of us.

Today, we can't cover everything or even 10% of all the important points about holiness. I just want to share five basic concepts that have completely changed how I think of holiness and the Church of the Nazarene as a "holiness church."

First, **holiness is ... God.** The Hebrew word in the Old Testament for holiness is *qodesh* and the Greek word in the New Testament is *hagios*. Both of these words basically mean "separation from the ordinary." I grew up hearing preachers go into all of the thousands of ways we're supposed to be "separate" - actions, clothing, thoughts, choices, attitudes, etc. But it's easy to forget that God is the essence of the holiness. Holiness basically refers to God's being. Holiness is God-li-ness. Anything or anyone or anywhere that is holy *is* holy only because it is related to God, because God's character or Spirit has saturated that person, place, or thing.

Holiness is God. This was an important revelation for me because I don't hate God. I have never hated God. I love God. I want more of God in my life. I want to be closer to God. Here's the thing. If you love God, then you love holiness. You might not like the way some people explain holiness, but you love holiness itself. That's important for us to remember. Holiness is God.

Second, **holiness is ... Jesus.** We can get all caught up with the holiness of the Old Testament. In the Old Testament, the primary way that people could be holy was by keeping all the rules, and if they didn't keep the rules, then they were in danger of being zapped by lightning. Nowadays, lots of people are living Leviticus lives as New Testament Christians. For them, holiness is all about not touching, not tasting, not doing all the bad stuff.

But the Bible tells us that Jesus is our clearest picture of God. If you want to know God, look at Jesus. If you want to understand God, look at Jesus.

So ... if holiness is God ... and Jesus is our clearest picture of God, then holiness is Jesus. If you want to understand holiness, look at Jesus. If you want to know what it means to live a holy life, look at how Jesus lived life. Look at how Jesus loved. Look at how Jesus talked. Holiness simply means living like Jesus -- or more correctly -- holiness means Jesus living in us and through us.

Jesus says that he is sending us into the world just as God sent him. He gave himself to God so that we can give ourselves to God. He is in us and we are in him (John 17). Holiness is life in Christ- living in Jesus, giving ourselves completely to God and God's mission in the world. Holiness is Jesus.

Third, **holiness is ... complex.** I think this is where many of the Nazarene preachers messed up. We tried to make holiness too easy to understand. We tried to fit holiness into an easy formula or a three step process. Think about it like this. Holiness is God. God is infinite. Humans are made in God's image. We are infinitely complex beings. Holiness for people is the very life of God becoming real in our human realities. That is some complex stuff.

God's life becoming real in broken human beings creates a lot of both/and situations. Holiness is full of paradoxes.

- *Holiness is serious and joyful.* Holiness demands serious commitment, but holiness also connects us with the deep joy of God.
- *Holiness is physical, emotional, and spiritual.* "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul, all your strength, and all your mind" (Luke 10:27). "Since we are living by the Spirit, let us follow the Spirit's leading in every part of our lives" (Galatians 5:25). Holiness involves every single part of life. Nothing is left out. Everything counts for holiness.
- *Holiness is brokenness and wholeness.* A fundamental part of holiness is being broken before God - simply recognizing how sinful and needy we are. Yet another part of holiness is accepting how completely God loves us and living a whole and healthy life.
- *Holiness is individual and communal.* Holiness is something that happens inside of us as individuals, but it is also something that happens as we live in community. I am discovering that there are parts of God's grace that I simply cannot access without deep and honest community with other men.
- *Holiness is inward and outward.* Holiness is something that happens on the inside, but it's also something that happens on the outside. It's our relationship with God and our relationship with people.
- *Holiness is culturally embedded and counter-cultural.* We live in the world and communicate the gospel in terms our culture can understand, but we are citizens of a different Kingdom. Followers of Jesus naturally live counter-cultural lives.
- *Holiness is not us but is still us.* Holiness is first of all something that God does in us. It's pure grace. We can't make ourselves holy. But holiness also demands our participation. God can't make it happen if we don't work with him. We still have important choices to make.
- *Holiness is already and not yet.* If we trust in Christ, we are already holy because Christ's blood covers us, but God's holiness has not yet become fully really in us. So we "press on to possess that perfection for which Christ Jesus first possessed" us (Philippians 3:12).

Holiness is very complex, but holiness is so complex that it is also very simple.

Holiness is simply ... relationship. The deep life of holiness is like a marriage. Michael Palmer helped me see this connection.

In a dating relationship, you may be having lots of fun together. You laugh together and you hug and kiss and go to the movies. But you can also walk away and go to your own home. You can break up and get back together if you want.

Sometimes we relate to God like we're dating. We hold back. We play games. Sure, we send him a nice card or a bunch of roses. We go for long walks on the beach, but at the end of the day or the week or the year, we want to go back to our own homes and our own ways. We at least want to keep that "out," so that if it gets too hard we can give up.

When you marry someone, you are making a promise for life. You are covenanting to stay together through thick and thin, no matter what. You are promising

to learn and to grow together, to forgive and to cry together, to rejoice and to love together, for the rest of your lives. That's what it means when you say, "I do."

But after "I do" comes the rest of life. We succeed, and we fail. We love each other, and we hurt each other. I heard someone say this week that nothing shows us our own selfishness like getting married. Marriage is a guarantee for failure. You can't be married without failing. It's too hard. We're too selfish and too messed up not to hurt each other. That's just how it works.

If we're dating, maybe we just walk away. But if we're married, we work it out. We have the freedom to stay and work it out because we know that we are undyingly committed to each other body and soul. We have a foundation of loving commitment, so we know that we are going to get through this - whatever "this" is. Slowly, slowly, slowly, we become better at loving and being loved, and that's what marriage is all about.

God is asking us to marry him, to go all in. God is asking us for our total commitment. God is asking us to give him our total selves, to commit the rest of our lives to him. That may seem crazy scary at first - and it should. But here's what makes it work. God is already wholeheartedly committed to us. God has already given himself to us - body and soul. Jesus has already died for us. God will never, never, never stop loving us, no matter what.

Holiness is engaging in the marriage relationship with God. Holiness is being totally committed to God and trusting God's total commitment to us. Holiness is marriage.

That leads us to the final and most important point about holiness. **Holiness is ... love.** The holy life is very organic - like plants. Paul prayed, "May your roots go down deep into God's love" (Ephesians 3:17). Jesus said, "I am the vine, and you are the branches. Those who remain in me, and I in them, will produce much fruit" (John 15:5). Paul described this too: "The Holy Spirit produces this kind of fruit in our lives: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control" (Galatians 5:22-23).

Isaiah saw God on his throne and heard the angel's shouting "Holy, Holy, Holy," and his first feeling was pain and shame. For most of us, as soon as we start talking about holiness, we start feeling guilty because we know how unholy we are. This is not all bad. We want to run away from our guilt and hide our sins, so we need God to shine a holy light into our hearts to force us to see who we really are.

But we can't root in that guilt. We can't let that guilt and shame and anxiety define us. If our sin and brokenness remains the core of our reality - our defining characteristic, then we will live guilty and shameful and anxious lives. We have to change where we put our roots.

Love is the root of the holy life. God is love. Holiness begins in knowing that we are deeply loved. If we don't experience God's deep and utter love for us, then holiness is hopeless for us. Without God's unshakable love, we will forever be lost in the guilt and shame of our unholy lives.

Only God's amazing love can free our soul's from sin's grip. Only God's all-out love can free us from our selfishness. Only God's unstoppable love can calm our fears

that make us hurt each other. Only God's limitless love can convince us that we are still loved despite all our failings. May your roots go down deep into God's love so that God's love stabilizes and fuels your life. May the depths of your being reach into God's love so that God's love can saturate your life.

Love is the root of the holy life, but it is also the fruit. Paul said, "The only thing that matters is faith expressing itself through love," and "The whole law is summed up in this one command: 'Love your neighbor as you love yourself'" (Galatians 5:6 & 14). In many ways, all of "the fruit of the Spirit" are expressions of love - kindness, patience, gentleness, faithfulness. Holiness is all about God's life becoming real in us. Holiness is all about our love for others becoming like God's love for us.

But here is the most important part of this whole discussion. At this point, we can start feeling guilty again because we're not very loving, and we can start making promises to work harder to be more loving and more patient and more self-controlled. But just think about that for a minute. These are fruit. A tree doesn't work hard to make fruit. Fruit just happens. Fruit just comes out of a tree that is living and healthy.

We can't build an apple. No one can work hard enough to create a banana. No laboratory on earth can engineer an orange without a living tree. We can't MAKE the fruit of the Spirit. We can't make ourselves more loving or more patient or more good.

All we can do is connect to the life source. All we can do is connect to the Spirit. All we can do is put our roots down into God's love. All we can do is make SPACE for God. Then, God's Spirit will do God's mysterious spiritual work in us. If we make SPACE for God in our personal lives, in our family lives, in our church, God will make us more loving and more joyful and more faithful and more peace-filled. If we put our roots down into God's love, and take time to soak up God's love, then God's love will saturate our lives. That's just how life works. God's Spirit makes God's fruit (or God's life) in people who make SPACE to stay connected to the Spirit.

Holiness is love. Love is the root. Love is the fruit. Love is everything. Holiness is love.

Make sure you hear this. This is the gospel. This is the good news that Jesus died to give us. God loved us before the creation of the world. But we are selfish and sinful, and we rejected God's unstoppable love. But because God's love is unstoppable, we couldn't stop it. God kept loving us. God kept chasing us. Jesus died on the cross so that our sins can be forgiven and so that the power of sin can be broken in our lives. Jesus died so that we can know God's love and so that God's love can set us free.

This is holiness. Holiness is God - God living in us. Holiness is Jesus - it's all about Jesus. Holiness is complex because we are complex. Holiness is a committed marriage relationship with our loving God who never gives up on us. Holiness is love - God's love filling us and becoming real in us.

Let God's holy love capture your heart and set you free. Make space for God's holiness to become real in you this week. Now let's practice making space for God with a time of silence.