



Called to Be God's Holy People

What does it mean for the church to be holy as Jesus the Christ is holy? God set apart a people known as the Israelites and gave them laws to guide their day-to-day living.

Jesus challenged his followers to look beyond the letter of the law to the heart of the law.

We are to love God with all our hearts, souls, mind, and strength.

We are to love and care for our neighbor, as well as love and care for ourselves – the greatest of all the laws – but how?

This study invites participants to enter into these passages of Scriptures, with many questions of what it means for us today to be set apart from culture while loving and embracing our neighbor.

These questions are open-ended, with no conclusions.

You may bring your own questions beyond those offered here.

We believe and trust in the Holy Spirit to guide you.

To Be a Holy People Bible Study Series

Lesson 1: Called to be Holy

Exodus 19: 5 – 6: ⁵ Now if you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all nations you will be my treasured possession. Although the whole earth is mine, ⁶ you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.’

Leviticus 19: 2 “Speak to the entire assembly of Israel and say to them: ‘Be holy because I, the Lord your God, am holy. [Refrain repeated throughout the holiness code]

I Peter 2:20 “But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people in order that you might proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.”

What did it mean for Israel to be a holy nation – set apart from all other surrounding nations/pervading cultures? What did it mean to be priests – those who would mediate between Yahweh and those around them? What was God’s design and desire for his people? Were they just to be “different” or were these a guide for health and wholeness?

Skim through the Holiness Code (Leviticus 17 – 26)

1. Consider the laws that now make perfect sense with our modern understanding of germs and hygiene, even though germs were not discovered until centuries later. How does this exemplify God’s protection of his people?
2. Consider the food laws in light of how refrigeration and food preparation improved since these laws were given. How do they exemplify God’s protection for his people?
3. Chapter 18 and 20 give guidance to sexual purity. These prohibitions include sexual relations with one’s mother, stepmother, sister, stepsister, sister-in-law, aunt, granddaughter, daughter-in-law, with a woman as well as her daughter, with a ritually unclean woman, with the wife of a neighbor, with another man, or with an animal. The list in chapter 18 is repeated in chapter 20 in a chiasmic structure. In what ways do these prohibitions continue to make sense in today’s culture?
4. Which of the laws throughout the Code now seem archaic and no longer applicable to today? How does our gained understanding through science affect our understanding of the laws?
5. What principles can guide a community of faith to discern which food, hygiene and sexual purity laws continue to hold for the people of God who are called to be holy?
6. The Israelites continued to be concerned with what was *clean and unclean* and continued to develop laws in greater and greater detail in order to preserve their identity as a people set apart from other nations. How did Jesus challenge these laws?
7. In light of this Holiness Code, what did it mean for Israel to be a holy/set apart people? What does it mean for the followers of Christ to be holy?

Lesson 2: A Shifting Perspective on Clean and Unclean – Acts 10

Mark 7: 14 -15: Again, Jesus called the crowd to him and said, “Listen to me, everyone, and understand this. ¹⁵ Nothing outside a person can defile them by going into them. Rather, it is what comes out of a person that defiles them.”

Luke 11: 39 - 41: Then the Lord said to him, “Now then, you Pharisees clean the outside of the cup and dish, but inside you are full of greed and wickedness. ⁴⁰ You foolish people! Did not the one who made the outside make the inside also? ⁴¹ But now as for what is inside you—be generous to the poor, and everything will be clean for you.

Read the story of Peter and Cornelius in Acts 10.

1. Notice in the Luke verse above the importance of generosity, in light of the description of Cornelius’ character. Define generosity and why does Jesus say it is “everything”? How would you rate your own generosity to the poor and how do you define poor?
2. God intervenes to create generous space for Peter to minister to Cornelius. What laws or barriers need to be overcome in order for this ministry to happen?
 - a. What barriers did Cornelius need to overcome?
 - b. What barriers did Peter need to overcome?
3. Focus on verse 14 - 15. Peter is adamant that he is faithful to the law. It takes God speaking to Peter 3 times to convince him that the rules are changing.
 - a. Share an experience where God has changed your conviction on an issue.
 - b. *What God has made clean, you must not call profane.* What has God declared clean for us today in order to create space for connection?
4. READ Mark 5: Discuss together the three healings in regard to people considered unclean. In what ways did Jesus pave the way to shift the perspective on what is clean and unclean? How did Jesus move beyond the law to compassion?
5. When something is unclean, we either clean it or throw it away. Are there ways that we have thrown people away or written them off?
6. What are ways we fear that a community of faith might become unclean? Consider Matthew 23: 13 – 26. What warnings are we to heed from these words?
7. Is it the church’s job to place a Christian ethic upon the general society? When or when not could it be appropriate?
8. Respond to this quote: *Compassion without truth is empty sentimentality; truth without compassion is lifeless and powerless in an age of justice.* How might Peter have responded to this request to meet and eat with Cornelius in light of this quote? Would it have made the decision easier or more difficult?
9. From this lesson, what is God’s design or desire for his followers to be a holy generous people?

Lesson 3: All things are lawful but . . . I Corinthians 6, 7

I Cor 10: 23 “All things are lawful for me” but not all things are beneficial. “All things are lawful” but not all things build up. Do not seek your own advantage but that of the other.

Galatians 5: 13 – 14 For you, brothers and sisters, were called for freedom. Only don't use your freedom for gain to the flesh, but through love be servants to one another. For the whole law is fulfilled in one word, in this: “You shall love your neighbour as yourself.”

We know from the archeological findings of the city of Pompei, destroyed by the eruption of Mount Vesuvius in 79 C.E., that sexual promiscuity was rampant within the Roman culture. It is clear that this particular city was dedicated to prostitution and sexual licentiousness. There was great reason for Paul to urge the new-found faith communities to live differently. Pervading culture is not the standard, God is the only one who can define what it means to be holy.

1. The world uses the courts system to settle disputes, but Paul calls the church to be different – set apart from that system. Culture is not to set the standard. What does the church offer in regard to settling disputes that a court or legal system cannot offer?
2. The words “All things are lawful for me” is put in quotations as Paul is quoting some common phrase or saying in their community. With the new freedoms found in Christ, what is Paul warning against?
3. “Foods for the belly, and the belly for foods” is also in quotes. From the corrected doctrine that all foods are lawful, the Corinthians thus extrapolated that all sexual behavior is therefore lawful. God made food for the belly, and the belly for food, therefore, perhaps God made the body for pleasure and pleasure for the body. What is false in this thinking?
4. The church has been criticized for being over vigilant around sexual sin while turning a blind eye to other sinful proclivities in the church community. If we ignore some sins must we ignore all, or how do we create consistent standards for holiness around all the behaviours Paul lists?
5. Christian liberty is always tempered by the needs of the community over the individual. Our goal must be to seek “the good of others” (I Cor 10) Is not sexual relations a private matter between consenting adults? How does sexual immorality impact community – both within the church and within society?
6. 1 Cor. 6:9, Paul uses a word formed from the same-sex prohibition in Lev. 18:22 and 20:13.5. One important interpretive issue among Christian readers of the Bible is the nature of the relationship between the Old and New Testaments, and how an interpretive framework applies to ethical issues today. What are we to make of Paul's continued use of themes found in the Old Testament to apply to the Christian church?
7. In chapter 7, Paul recognizes the human need for sexual relationships for both men and woman. These are to be met in the marriage bed. *For it is better to marry than to burn with passion.* What room might be given in this sentiment for those who are same sex attracted to find intimacy through monogamous marriage?
8. In Chapter 7: 17ff, Paul addresses the circumcised and uncircumcised, the slave, the virgin, the widow with this phrase, “Let each of you remain in the condition in which you were called”. He is a strong advocate for a life of celibacy, but recognizes it is not everyone's calling. How might this give guidance to those who are same sex attracted?
9. From this study, what sets apart the people of God as holy in our sexuality?

Lesson 4: Eunuchs and the Kingdom – Acts 8: 26 - 40

Deuteronomy 23:1 - No one whose testicles are crushed or whose penis is cut off shall be admitted to the assembly of the LORD. Those born of an illicit union shall not be admitted to the assembly of the LORD. Even to the 10th generation, none of their descendants shall be admitted to the assembly of the LORD.

Isaiah 56: 3 – 5 - Let no foreigner who is bound to the Lord say, “The Lord will surely exclude me from his people.” And let no eunuch complain “I am only a dry tree.”⁴For this is what the Lord says: “To the eunuchs who keep my Sabbaths, who choose what pleases me and hold fast to my covenant—⁵to them I will give within my temple and its walls a memorial and a name better than sons and daughters; I will give them an everlasting name that will endure forever.

Eunuchs were castrated males and because they were neither fully masculine nor feminine, they were considered unclean according to the laws of the people of Israel. The temple was segregated by tribe, by race, and by gender. The Holy Place was for the Levitical priesthood only. The inner court was for Jewish men only. The next court was for Jewish women only. The outer court, the one where Jesus taught and where the first Christians met, was for the rest, for the leftovers, for the unclean and the un-gendered.

1. Why do you believe God specifically send Phillip to this Ethiopian? What did Phillip need to learn? What did the Ethiopian need to learn?
2. By race and by physical disability, the Ethiopian is doubly unclean. What hesitations might Phillip have experienced?
3. Phillip could have quoted Deuteronomy 23:1 to the man with “The Scriptures clearly say . . .” as a reason why the Eunuch might not be welcome in the church. How might this inform the way that we understand and use certain texts of Scripture?
4. The Isaiah passage quoted above seems to indicate a new day that is different from the law of Deuteronomy. Those who once had no place are now given a place of honour. What criteria is given for the eunuch to find God’s favour in the Isaiah context?
5. The Ethiopian was not likely a eunuch by choice, but probably castrated as an infant in order to serve the royal family. As we see in the book of Esther, eunuchs were put in charge of the king’s wives and harems in order for them to be protected and kept pure for the king alone. To be a eunuch was not of his choosing but the Scripture was clear that he was not welcomed in the temple. Yet, he had a hunger for God and to know truth and understand Scripture. What guidance might the church glean in how we minister to the LGBT community?
6. It is hard to imagine that we would exclude a child born out of wedlock from the community of faith today as was called for in Deuteronomy 23:1. What guides the church to interpret such verses so that we understand the original reasons for such a law but would not engage that same law today?
7. How do we minister to those that were once deemed unclean and unacceptable in the Jewish community? How do we discern the guidance of the Holy Spirit in similar matters as God’s people called to be holy?

Lesson 5: Beyond the Law - Matthew 19

Genesis 2: 24 Therefore a man leaves his father and his mother and clings to his wife, and they shall become one flesh.

Malachi 2: 16 “The man who hates and divorces his wife,” says the Lord, the God of Israel, “does violence to the one he should protect,” says the Lord Almighty. So be on your guard, and do not be unfaithful.

Matthew 5: 31 – 32 It has been said, ‘Anyone who divorces his wife must give her a certificate of divorce.’³² But I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, makes her the victim of adultery, and anyone who marries a divorced woman commits adultery.

God created our world with a grand design for us to walk in harmony with and dependency upon our Designer. The creature, all too soon broke with their Creator in a grasp for independence and self-sufficiency and paradise was lost. The ideal was corrupted, and the Grand Designer has been working for our reconciliation and restoration ever since. How does God restore his creation back his original design for a people who are to be holy?

1. “You have heard it said . . . but I say . . .” Matthew 5 – 7, known as the Sermon on the Mount reminds us that God has a better way for us than what the law can establish. In what ways was the law a concession for God’s people, but far from the original dream for God’s chosen people?
2. In Chapter 19, the pharisees come to Jesus with a question regarding the law around divorce. Jesus responds with God’s original intent. What is God’s original design?
3. Where was divorce written into the law? We do not read it in the holiness code or elsewhere in the book of Leviticus. Priests were not allowed to divorce or marry a divorced woman. Deuteronomy describes the situation around divorce, but it is not the law itself. Why did divorce become such a common practice in Jewish communities?
4. Jesus speaks very clearly God’s desire for marriage. Jesus also recognizes sin and that human vows are broken. Jesus notes that even if the human vow is broken, God still holds the vow sacred and so remarriage is adultery. These are hard words. How does the church today understand God’s ideal alongside of God’s compassion?
5. Notice the response of the disciples. What does this indicate regarding the high calling upon believers? When Jesus argues for marriage, does he move toward a stricter ethic or more expanded understanding?
6. “Not everyone can accept this teaching, but only to whom it is given”. What does this mean for us as the followers of Jesus and his teachings?
7. Do you have any idea as to why Jesus goes on to speak of eunuchs in this context?
8. Are there other ways that God might allow grace when the ideal is not yet to be?
9. How does Mark 10: 11 – 12, differ from Matthew 19:9, and again from Paul in I Cor 7: 12 – 15? Does this give any clues to law and grace?
10. What is our call as God’s holy people in our understanding and approach to marriage and also to divorce?

Lesson 6: You shall know a tree by its fruit - Matthew 7: 13 - 28

Matthew 7:1 “Do not judge so that you will not be judged. For in the way you judge, you will be judged; and by your standard of measure, it will be measured to you.

Mark 10: 25: It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God.”

Galatians 5: 22-24 But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, ²³ gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law. ²⁴ Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires.

What does it mean to flourish in the Kingdom of God? A seed is never the end, only the beginning and it is difficult to tell what a seed when properly planted and watered will look like full grown and flourishing. In fact, we are not to judge the seed, only the fruit it will eventually bear. Our passage of Scripture is challenging for the one who claims Christ as Lord yet has little fruit to show for it. Is it I, Lord?

1. Jesus is not descriptive in what good fruit looks like in this passage. One would think that casting out demons and performing miracles would be wondrous fruit! What is the evidence that Jesus is looking for in a true follower of him?
2. The Sermon on the Mount is brought to conclusion with the parable of the housebuilder, implying that the foundation on which to build our lives is the teachings of Jesus found in chapters 5 – 7. Chapter 5 establishes the legitimacy of the law of Moses: ¹⁹ *Therefore anyone who sets aside one of the least of these commands and teaches others accordingly will be called least in the kingdom of heaven.* What pattern do we see in the way Jesus now applies the past laws given?
3. There seems to be a contradiction in that we are not to offer judgement upon another, yet we are to judge the quality of fruit as evidence of a life serving Christ. The sad truth is that we do judge one another all the time. We do not see the logs in our own eyes while looking for the speck in our brother or sister’s eye. So, what situations call for Christians to hold one another accountable?
4. Go through chapters 5 – 7 and name the fruit that Jesus is looking for in his followers. Which ones would you give your church gold stars and which a failing grade?
5. How do we understand those whose lives bear abundant fruit and evidence of the Spirit in their faith and lives, yet their beliefs do not check all of our Christian boxes? What is the difference between a virtue (fruit) and a law?
6. In what ways does love, a spiritual fruit as exemplified in the love and compassion of Jesus, call people *toward* holiness, and not away from it?
7. Jesus is very clear that there is great danger in false prophets misleading the people. It is not one’s credentials that give credence to one’s teachings, but a life exemplifying Christ. Today it feels that we are bombarded by contrary teachings within the church. How do we discern God’s holy design and will for his people? How do we discern truth?

Some Concluding Thoughts:

Matthew 5: 48 Be perfect, therefore as your heavenly Father is perfect.

Romans 1: 7 To all in Rome who are loved by God and called to be his holy people: Grace and peace to you from God our Father and from the Lord Jesus Christ.

1 Corinthians 1:2 To the church of God in Corinth, to those sanctified in Christ Jesus and called to be his holy people, together with all those everywhere who call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ—their Lord and ours . . .

What is your reaction/response to this quote of David Fitch:

Whenever holiness becomes extracted from the believer's everyday life of discipleship and becomes a test of every believer's faith, bad things happen. Holiness becomes something to believe in rather than something worked out in our daily lives. It becomes coercive, not enlivening, life-giving, and transformative. Things like sexuality, marriage and divorce, money, and addiction become areas of shaming instead of opportunities for faith, submission, obedience, discernment, healing, and Spirit empowerment in God's presence. We lose the very practices that shape our way of life. And it is questionable whether what is left can still be considered "church." Fitch, David E.. What Is the Church and Why Does It Exist? - Page 21

We know that God is calling us as disciples of Christ to be holy. We are citizens of a different kingdom than the kingdom of the world. Christ was very clear that his reign calls his followers into a different realm and unique life that is set apart from the visible earthly ways. We are not to be conformed to the patterns of the world but to think differently and act differently. This particularly affects how we live in community, how we "agape" one another, how we manage wealth and ownership, how we care for the vulnerable in our midst, how we understand and use power, how we mutually submit to one another and how to embrace our sexuality. The ethical and moral issues of our day take much prayerful discernment as a community of faith, much study of Scripture and dialogue with one another with a spirit of humility and grace.

Dear friends, let us persevere as we seek God and his good and perfect will for his chosen, holy people. For our unity will be realized, not in our beliefs and practices but in Christ and Christ alone.