

Holiness


... is what faith looks like

Rugby Elim Church

Palm Sunday, 25 March 2018

Introduction

One of the questions I'm asked most frequently is, 'Which football team do you support?'

I confess I've always been more of a rugby man myself... but since Gary Lineker moved to Japan, and I could no longer support Spurs I have vaguely supported  Liverpool. I say 'vaguely' because:

1. I've never been to Anfield
2. I've never owned a replica Liverpool shirt
3. I've never seen a full match live, even on TV
4. I couldn't name all eleven first team players
5. I even had to look up their position in the league (3rd)

I am nothing compared to a *proper* fan, who can name not only the current players but dozens of previous players, FA cup results, they buy a replica shirt every year and a season ticket – and maybe even a Sky subscription so they can watch every away match too.

I wonder what the equivalent would be for Christians? Instead of naming Liverpool's first team, can you name all twelve disciples? (It's harder than you might think!)

Instead of spending 66½ hours watching all the Liverpool Premier League matches in a season, have you read all 66 books of the Bible? Can you even name them all?

Of course you can be a Christian without being able to name lists like that. Being a Christian depends on faith – first of all Jesus' faithfulness to his vocation, and second of all our faith in him.


This is a wonderful truth of the gospel: by God's mercy there is no entrance exam, there are no replica shirts and season tickets to buy, there are no lists to memorise. We don't have to go through Good Friday ourselves, we don't have to die in our sins, because Jesus has done that for us, he has died in our place. We don't have to earn new life because Jesus has done that for us, and gives it as a free gift to all who believe in him. **§ Salvation is a gift.**

But salvation is also only the *beginning* of the Christian life. It is the *foundation* of the building, it is the *first step*, hopefully of many steps on the journey of faith. That journey, that building is called *holiness*.

Holiness

When I asked Simon a few weeks ago what he'd like me to preach on this morning, his response was, 'You get to choose... it's Palm Sunday so be free to preach like a Pente!'

You know, it's great to be here. I've known Simon for a couple of years as we were on the Arrow Leadership Programme together, and we were 'sock buddies' – prayer partners.

I arrived at one of the residentials in quite a bad place, and within 24 hours my back had gone. I've had back problems since it went in my early 20s, but this was one of the worst – I couldn't stand up straight, I was literally bent double . The next morning I only just made it out to my car, and to a shop to buy a shedload of ibuprofen.

I struggled through the day, and after the last session I hobbled out of the room, bent double in pain, and I felt God say to me, 'Go back in there and ask Simon to pray for you.' I was like, 'No, I don't want to do any more walking than I have to.'

God said, 'Go back in there and ask Simon to pray for you.' So I rolled the eyes of my spirit, turned around and went back into the room. I sat next to Simon, and asked him to pray for me – which he did – and nothing happened.

So I got up, hobbled back to my room and lay flat on my bed for a few minutes, contemplating my misery.

After a while I had to get up for dinner, so I stood up. It took a couple of moments before I realised I could stand up. It still hurt, but nothing like before. By the end of the evening I was able to run up the stairs, and the next day I walked 14 kilometres – 24 hours after I had barely been able to stand, let alone move.

Such is the power of Pente Prayer!

Or rather, such is the power of God. I imagine that many of you have experienced or witnessed healings like this, times when God has stepped in to your life decisively and made a difference.

But I know for certain that *all* of us here will have experienced or witnessed times when God *hasn't* done that. My back has gone at least once a year since I was 21, and only *once* in all that time has God healed it like he did on Arrow.

When God doesn't heal, it can cause real hurt and anguish, not least because it can cause us to question our faith, to question whether our faith is strong enough, or deficient in some way. Ay that is why God hasn't answered our prayer for healing.

But friends, we shouldn't judge our faith based on the miracles we see or don't see. When Jesus said if we have faith the size of a mustard seed we can tell a mountain to move, his point was about the power of God, not the strength of faith.

No: God hardens whom he hardens, he has mercy on whom he has mercy, and he heals whom he heals. We must always cry out to God for healing, but never forget that Jesus himself cried out for the cup of suffering to be taken away from him – and it wasn't.

So it isn't miracles that show how strong our faith is: it's *holiness*.

¶ Holiness is what faith *looks like*. *Repeat*

A disciple is not a disciple because she or he can name all the books of the Bible.

A disciple is not a disciple because she or he prays and sees miracles of healing.

They are good things – we should read and learn what the Bible says, we should pray for healing, and praise God when it happens.

But friends, *holiness is what faith looks like*.

Faith is how we respond gratefully to God's gift of new life and salvation – and *holiness is what faith looks like*.

In today's world we are so tempted to take shortcuts. Athletes use performance-enhancing drugs. Team Sky have been in trouble for making the most of various legal loopholes called 'Therapeutic Use Exemptions'. Justin Gatlin was booed when he beat Usain Bolt – why? Because he'd taken a shortcut by using steroids.

Shortcuts in churches are when we put style over substance – trying to make ourselves look as lively and attractive as possible. Being attractive is important – as long as the attraction is Christ within us – that is, *holiness*.

Shortcuts in churches are when we spend too much time praying for God to do this or that, and not enough time sharing the gospel. Too often we are lazy when it comes to living the life God calls us to – instead wanting God to do it all for us.

Prayer is critical, but so is effort on our part – Paul says it like this:

I continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you to will and to act in order to fulfil his good purpose.

Philippians 2.12-13 (NIV)

This is a joint effort, and it's hard: we work it out, as God works in us. This is *holiness*: and holiness is what faith *looks like*.

In case you are in any doubt of the importance of holiness, listen to these words from the New Testament **J**:

[Jesus said,] ‘For I tell you that unless **your righteousness** surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven.’

Matthew 5.20 (NIV)

To all in Rome who are loved by God and called **to be his holy people**.

Romans 1.7 (NIV)

For [God] chose us in [Jesus] before the creation of the world **to be holy and blameless** in his sight.

Ephesians 1.4 (NIV)

Make every effort to live in peace with everyone and **to be holy**; without holiness no one will see the Lord.

Hebrews 12.14 (NIV)

But just as he who called you is holy, so **be holy in all you do**; for it is written: ‘Be holy, because I am holy.’

1 Peter 1.15-16 (NIV)

There are many other verses which speak of holiness – which is both a gift in Christ, and a command. We work it out, as God works in us – it is both a gift *and* a command.

¶ Holy people practice good works, not to earn God's present or future favour, but as a way of laying hold of that for which Christ has laid hold of them.

JI Packer, Rediscovering Holiness, 97

The gift was won for us at great cost – Jesus' own life, his blood shed on the cross – so let us not ignore the command. *Pause*

I often ask my own church family this question: what difference does being a Christian make in your life?

Or, to put it another way, do you look any different to everyone else in your family / workplace / social club / friendship group?

Or, to put it yet another way, if someone were studying you to see what it means to be a Christian, what would they conclude?

Friends, we *should* look, sound, think, talk, act, and *be* different, because Christ is within us, the hope of glory. Jesus is the treasure in our cracked and broken jars of clay. We are called to be a holy people, set apart to worship and serve our God – are we?

A new vicar moved into town and went out **one Saturday** to visit his parishioners. All went well until he came to one house. It was obvious that someone was home, but no one came to the door even after he had knocked several times. Finally, he took out his card, wrote on the back, 'Revelation 3:20' § and stuck it in the door. The next day, he found his card in the collection plate. Below his verse were written the words, 'Genesis 3:10' §.

Packer describes well the contemporary church. At one extreme are those who focus completely on devotion, emotional warmth, passion, experiences and expressions of God's love – they believe this deep ardour is holiness. At the other extreme are those who focus on rule-keeping, being meticulously honest and correct at work and at home, shunning 'worldly' activities, insisting on God's truth and pointing out others' sin.

Between these extremes you find various types of moral and spiritual nondescripts – disciples of sorts, but not very zealous in devotion nor very conscientious in obedience; mediocrities, in fact, who could not in any way be described as modelling holiness, only as muddling along with the Lord. I expect that description covers most of us.

JI Packer, Rediscovering Holiness, 152

Friends, if we're honest, I think Packer is right. Too often we can be described accurately as **♫ moral and spiritual nondescripts, mediocrities** who are **muddling along with the Lord**.

Is that the kind of disciple you want to be? *Repeat?*

Because it's not the kind of disciple I want to be. I want people to look at me and see not a reflection of themselves, but Jesus through me. I want people to look at me and see, not a holier-than-thou hypocrite, but a man of God who is following Jesus with all his heart. But how often I fail and fall short of that ideal.

Repentance

When Jesus entered Jerusalem on the donkey **♫**, he was surrounded **a very large crowd**, Matthew tells us (21.8) – **they spread their cloaks on the road**, and **cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road**. It was quite the procession – the crowds before him and the crowds after him were all shouting (21.9), **'Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest heaven!'** It was quite the scene.

Within six days the very same people were yelling (27.22), **'Crucify him, crucify him!'** One day they were praising the arrival of Jesus as king – the next they were demanding Jesus be crucified.

Oh, how easy it is for us to judge them. How easy it is to sit here, 2,000 years later and scoff. How easy it is to read our Bibles and point out just how badly they got it wrong.

But are they so different to us?

How many of us come to church on Sunday and sing, ‘Hosanna’ – ‘God saves’ – and then for the rest of the week live as though God is *at best* an irrelevance? How many of us come to church and sing at the top of our voices, and then go home and yell at our kids, lie at work, gossip to our friends, look at things we shouldn’t on our computers?

We may as well be joining the crowds shouting, ‘Crucify’.

If that sounds harsh, I’m not going to apologise – because it’s true.

Friends, is it any wonder that our churches are struggling in mission, when this is what its members are like? JI Packer again:

§ If we want to be fruitful in evangelism, we must cultivate holiness of life.

Packer, Rediscovering Holiness, 35

Holiness is what faith looks like – so without it, faith is invisible, it appears irrelevant, unnecessary, and a waste of time.

So how do we **cultivate holiness of life**?

To use another sport analogy – when a team is struggling, what do the pundits all say? Something like, ‘They need to get back to basics. Do the basics well, and everything will fall into place.’

Friends, it’s a bit like that with discipleship. In fact it’s *exactly* like that. It isn’t complicated, it’s pretty straightforward – but goodness me it’s hard! It’s a lot like being married...

A couple was celebrating their golden wedding anniversary. Their domestic tranquillity had long been the talk of the town. A local newspaper dispatched a reporter to report on the secret of their long and happy marriage.

‘Well, it dates back to our honeymoon,’ explained the husband. ‘We visited the Grand Canyon and took a trip down to the bottom of the canyon by donkey. We hadn’t gone far when my wife’s donkey stumbled. She said quietly, “That’s once.”

‘We proceeded a little further when the donkey stumbled again. My wife said quietly, “That’s twice.”

‘We hadn’t gone half a mile when the donkey stumbled a third time. My wife promptly removed a revolver from her pocket and shot the donkey dead.

‘I started to protest over her treatment of the donkey when she looked at me and said quietly, “That’s once.”’

Now please can I say, ‘Don’t do that at home?!’ I’m happy to give marital advice and support – but that is not it!

So what are the basics of the Christian life? Surely they revolve around prayer, Scripture, fellowship and evangelism. But there’s one particular thing I’d like us to think about today.

Remember the crowds crying, ‘Hosanna!’ one day, and, ‘Crucify!’ the next? Remember how we so regularly fail and fall short of the holiness we are called and commanded to cultivate?

And, remember how we said ¶ salvation is the ¶ *foundation*, the ¶ *first step* of a disciple’s life? It is also the ¶ *pattern* of a disciple’s life.

To become a Christian we must *repent* – that is, turn away from our sin, our old life, and turn towards God. When we come to our senses and do that, we find God is always there with a word of forgiveness – he is always there saying, ‘Welcome home, my child!’

But godly Christians know that repentance isn’t something we do once and once for all – but something we need to do *daily*.

] The Christian life has to be an exercise of continual repentance before it is anything else. (Packer, 123)

By that I don't mean going round looking miserable, crying out, 'We are worms!' I mean cultivating a humble heart, which not only recognises but *wants to do something about* our sin.

Paul describes this as **godly sorrow**:

Godly sorrow brings repentance that leads to salvation and leaves no regret, but worldly sorrow brings death.

2 Corinthians 7.10 (NIV)

In the Church of England we are required *by law* to have a prayer of confession every week. In theory it's a great idea. In my church I even pause before we say the words, and ask people to bring to mind the things they need to confess, before they say the words, to try and connect the words of confession with our daily life.

But even then it's hard to acknowledge our sin, because we don't want to. I don't know how you do that sort of thing in your church. But when was the last time you *wept* in sorrow for your sin? When was the last time you allowed the *Holy* Spirit to convict your heart of your sinfulness?

This is how Packer describes true repentance:

Repentance means not mere routine words of regret as one asks for pardon without one's heart being involved, but a deliberate confessing, an explicit self-humbling, and a sensing of shame in the presence of God as one contemplates one's failures.

Packer, Rediscovering Holiness, 133

And there is a moment in the Bible where this all happens, and I think it stands as a good model for us to end with.

King David is described in the Bible as a 'man after God's own heart' (see 1 Samuel 13.14). He listened to God, worshipped God with all his heart, and led God's people faithfully – three things I try and too often fail to do as a church leader.

But he got it spectacularly wrong when he saw Bathsheba bathing naked on the roof of her house. Her husband Uriah – one of David's top soldiers – was away, where David was supposed to be: waging war against Israel's enemies.

David sinned in his lust, and he sinned by acting on it with Bathsheba. And then he made it worse – when Bathsheba became pregnant, and it was obvious Uriah wasn't the father, in his desperation David arranged for Uriah to be killed in battle.

Never was it more true that two ‘wrongs’ *don’t* make a ‘right’.

David thought he got away with it; that his sin was secret. But one day the prophet Nathan came to him and told him this story:

‘There were two men, one rich and the other poor. The rich man had a large number of sheep, but the poor man had nothing except one little ewe lamb that he had bought. He raised it, and it grew up with him and his children. It shared his food, drank from his cup and even slept in his arms.

‘Now a traveller came to the rich man, but the rich man refrained from taking one of his own sheep to prepare a meal for the traveller. Instead, he took the ewe lamb from the poor man and prepared it.’

David burned with anger against the man and said to Nathan, ‘As surely as the Lord lives, the man who did this must die! He must pay for that lamb four times over, because he did such a thing and had no pity.’

Then Nathan said to David, ‘You are the man!’

2 Samuel 12.1-7 (NIV, abridged)

God had given David everything – even his kingdom! – and yet he took the one thing Uriah had, and killed him for it.

As soon as David heard this, he was cut to the heart. His response to Nathan? **‘I have sinned against the Lord’** (2 Samuel 7.13). And then he wrote what we know as Psalm 51. Let’s turn to it and see how David repented of his sin, as a model for us **§**.¹

1. Focused on God (1-2) **§**

Have mercy on me, O God,
according to your unfailing love;
according to your great compassion
blot out my transgressions.
Wash away all my iniquity
and cleanse me from my sin.

Psalm 51.1-2 (NIV)

David appeals to God’s **unfailing love**, to his **great compassion**. God knows us even before we are born – he knows we won’t be perfect, and yet he loves us anyway – and so he is always ready to forgive when we turn back to him and ask him for forgiveness.

¹ This section, see Packer, *Rediscovering Holiness*, 134-136.

2. Honest about our guilt (3-6) §

For I know my transgressions,
and my sin is always before me.
Against you, you only, have I sinned
and done what is evil in your sight;
so you are right in your verdict
and justified when you judge.
Surely I was sinful at birth,
sinful from the time my mother conceived me.
Yet you desired faithfulness even in the womb;
you taught me wisdom in that secret place.

Psalm 51.3-6 (NIV)

We are not sinners because we sin, but rather we sin because we are sinners (Packer, 134). David doesn't pretend that he's a good person; he knows he isn't, and he knows that ultimately all sin is sin against God. He doesn't pretend – he's honest about it.

3. Hungry for forgiveness (7-9) J

Cleanse me with hyssop, and I shall be clean;
wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow.

Let me hear joy and gladness;
let the bones you have crushed rejoice.

Hide your face from my sins
and blot out all my iniquity.

Psalm 51.7-9 (NIV)

David is desperate to be cleansed of his sin, to be clean – look at how he can't bear for God to see the stain of sin on his heart! This is a man who loves God, who knows God, and who knows how serious his sin is. He can hardly bear it.

We are right to feel ashamed when we sin – but not only does God take away our sin, he takes away our shame and replaces it with **joy and gladness** – the shame is gone, and instead we can **rejoice**.

This is true forgiveness – God's response to true repentance.

And it comes only from him. David knows he can't do anything about it himself – it is only *God* who can cleanse us from our sin, not positive thinking, not acts of penance.

4. Hopeful for new life (10-12) J

Create in me a pure heart, O God,
and renew a steadfast spirit within me.
Do not cast me from your presence
or take your Holy Spirit from me.
Restore to me the joy of your salvation
and grant me a willing spirit, to sustain me.

Psalm 51.10-12 (NIV)

God doesn't simply wipe the slate clean, he gives us a **pure** heart, a **steadfast** and **willing** spirit – a heart and a spirit more willing to respond to God in gratitude, as we should.

How I long for such a spirit!

This is the spirit that wants continually to grow, towards God, in holiness. It isn't easy, and it isn't quick. God doesn't wave a magic 'holiness' wand over us, but neither does he leave us to do it in our own strength. He gives us his Holy Spirit, and commands us to work out our salvation, to be holy, while he works in us. It's a joint effort – we work out the free and unconditional gift of our salvation while he works in us.

The Basics

These, then, are ‘the basics’. Repentance leading to salvation is the *foundation*, the *first step* and the *pattern* of the Christian life... **J**

1. Focused on God, we can be:
2. **J** honest about our guilt,
3. **J** hungry for forgiveness, and
4. **J** hopeful for new life.

If holiness is what faith looks like, then continual, daily repentance, is how we practise holiness. It’s a bit like weeding a garden – which we will all be doing as the weather warms up and the ground dries up – you need to do it regularly, because if you stop, before you know it the garden becomes overgrown.

The final word from Packer is this:

Unless and until it is re-established that the Christian life for everyone is a life of self-scrutiny, self-humbling, and daily repentance for daily sins, Satan will continue to score.

Packer, Rediscovering Holiness, 140

It isn't complicated, but neither is it easy, because our enemy doesn't want us to live like this. But we have the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead, and he is greater.

We work out our salvation while God works in us – and together we mould and form the character of a holy woman or man of God.

This is holiness. Holiness is what faith looks like.

And our perfect example of holiness? Jesus. The Anglican Bishop Stephen Neill says it best:

Here is the heart of it all. To move forward on the road of holiness means to know Jesus better. To him we always return.

Stephen Neill, Christian Holiness, 128
quoted in Packer, Rediscovering Holiness, 143

Friends let us make sure our first love is and remains Jesus. Let us get to know him better. Let us allow his light to shine through us. Let us daily repent of our sins. And let us be a holy people, whose faith is shown by our holiness.