

Streams of Living Water

The Holiness Stream

September 15, 2019

Texts: Psalm 51:1-12; Matthew 5:1-12; Galatians 5:16-25; Deuteronomy 6:1-9

Jesus taught about the virtuous of holy living in the Sermon on the Mount. In contrast to the *outward righteousness* of the Pharisees, our Lord taught about *an inner life with God* that transforms the heart and cultivates virtuous habits that God blesses. Jesus demonstrated that a virtuous life springs from love for God and neighbor rather than legalism—a slavish obedience to external rules. Jesus he railed against the hypocrisy of the Pharisees, who strove to keep the smallest details of the Jewish law, but neglected the most important matters (Matthew 23:23).

At its core, the holiness tradition is motivated by a desire to overcome the grip of sin by seeking transformation into God’s image through the power of the Holy Spirit. This desire is often expressed in practices that shun worldliness and pursue godliness in thought, speech, and action. The greatest strength of the holiness tradition is the commitment to become more like Jesus. It holds out the hope that one’s very character and inner motivation can be transformed (perhaps only over time) by the imitation of Christ. The Spirit-empowered life depends on the power of God to practice holy habits or spiritual disciplines that demonstrate growth “in the grace and knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ” (2 Peter 3:18).

From its beginning, the Anabaptist movement emphasized holiness of life by the power of the Holy Spirit. As Mennonites, we have deep roots in the Anabaptist tradition, but we have also drawn nutrients from the Wesleyan holiness movement. We have pursued some of the same practices as the Methodists, believing these disciplines can lead us into a progressive and ongoing transformation of our lives into the image of Jesus Christ. Particularly in an earlier era, the pursuit of holiness entailed the practice of clean and simple speech, modest dress and the shunning of worldly entertainment such as card-playing and dancing at parties. Our understanding of holiness also called for sexual “purity,” meaning sexual abstinence for singles and faithfulness to one’s spouse in a marriage covenant.

At its best, the virtuous life is focused on purity of the heart (the wellspring of action), knowing that the fruit springs up from the root. It gives hope for genuine progress in character transformation, based on a practical understanding of how we “grow in the grace and knowledge of Christ” through the disciplines of the spiritual life. However, without the balance of other Biblical emphases, these practices can easily devolve into legalism, focusing on externals as evidence of holiness. At its worst, the holiness tradition can foster hypocrisy and a judgmental, “holier-than-thou” attitude toward others with different standards of conduct.

Questions to ponder:

- 1) What have you seen in the holiness tradition that draws you in? What pushes you away?
- 2) What role has does the Holy Spirit play in helping Christians live according to the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew chapters 5-7)?
- 3) What are the disciplines or “holy habits” that you were taught which helped you to live a life that was pleasing to God?