

The Church Is Holy

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 04 February 2024

Preacher: Rev. Thomas Davis

[0 : 0 0] Well, I'd like us to turn together back to 1 Peter chapter 1, and we can read again verses 14 to 16. As obedient children, do not be conformed to the passions of your former ignorance, but as he who called you is holy, you also be holy in all your conduct, since it is written, you shall be holy, for I am holy.

This morning we started a very short kind of mini series that's only going to be four sermons long. We're doing two this week, and we're doing two next week. And the series is called Divided, Diluted, Disconnected, Developed, which is probably the weirdest sermon series title you've ever heard.

But I've chosen these because the series is all about the church, and these four words in our series title are deliberately contrasting with four very famous words that have described the church for the last 1,700 years.

In the fourth century, the Nicene Creed was written, and that creed, that short statement of faith has come to be recognized as a statement of Orthodox Christian truth, and in it it says, we believe in one holy, Catholic, and apostolic church.

And these four words, one holy, Catholic, and apostolic, are known as the attributes of the church. And so it's these that we are thinking about in our little series just now.

[1 : 3 5] As we said this morning, these words, although they are officially taken from the Nicene Creed, they're all based on biblical teaching. And we saw this morning that you can actually see them all in 1 Corinthians chapter 1, verses 1 to 2.

Paul is writing to the one church of God, and to the part of it that's in Corinth. He's writing to those who are sanctified, who are called to be saints. That's all the language of holiness.

He talks to them as those who are together, connected with others. That's what we mean by the word Catholic, that you're part of the universal church, not just a local isolated one.

And the teaching that the church is grounded on has been laid out by the apostles, Paul, and the others who served with him. So that language, one holy, Catholic, apostolic church, it's grounded in scripture, it's contained in the Nicene Creed, and it's what's been known as the four attributes of the church among theologians.

But today, in practice, the church can look very different, the church can feel very different. In many ways, today, the church is divided, diluted, disconnected, and developed.

[2 : 5 6] And we're going to be exploring each of these one by one together. This morning we looked at the unity of the church. This evening, we are going to be looking at the attribute of holiness.

Our title is, the church is holy. And that's grounded in what we read in 1 Peter chapter 1, verses 14 to 16.

It's a theme that runs right through the whole of scripture. So as we think about this, first question we got to ask is, well, what do we even mean by that word? When we talk about holy, what do we mean?

Well, the basic concept around holiness is the idea of being set apart. So when you see that word holy, you should think set apart. Frequently in the Old Testament, you would see things being set apart from a common use to a holy use.

They'd be consecrated for a special purpose. And so you have that contrast, for example, in Leviticus 10:10, the distinction between the holy and the common.

[4 : 0 0] But alongside that idea of being set apart, you also had the idea of purity. And frequently in the Old Testament, holiness is contrasted with being defiled or being unclean.

You can see that even in this verse here, you also see it in Leviticus 11:44, that being holy is contrasted with any idea of defilement or being unclean.

And these two concepts fit together to give us a more rounded understanding of holiness. To be holy is to be set apart and to be special, unique.

And that holiness must be maintained. Holiness is compromised if there's any contamination or corruption.

Perhaps a helpful illustration of the idea of holiness is to think of an operating theatre. If you imagine an operating theatre in a hospital, that is a space that is set apart from common use.

[5 : 0 1] You don't just walk in and out of it. It's a distinct and in many ways a cordoned off area. And in order for it to function properly, it has to be kept pure.

And everything in there is sterilized. And there has to be a very deliberate process of washing your hands before you enter into it. That's an illustration.

The definitive example of holiness is God himself. And that's what's emphasized in verse 16 of 1 Peter that God calls us to be holy because he is holy.

God is utterly set apart. So he alone is creator. He alone is divine. He's totally unique.

And God is utterly pure. So in God there is no corruption, no darkness, nothing twisted, nothing distorted.

[6 : 0 2] There's nothing but infinite moral perfection in God. So holiness is a key attribute of God.

But what we're seeing tonight is that that attribute of holiness is also applied to the church, to us. Now whenever we apply an attribute of God to ourselves, there's always similarity and difference.

The difference lies in the fact that we are not in the same category as God and we're never going to be. And you can see that God doesn't say, be divine like I'm divine.

He's not placing us in that category. And so there's always that difference. That holiness is not going to be identical to the holiness of God, but there is similarity.

And despite recognizing the differences, the church is still holy and that holiness reflects the holiness of God. So the church is set apart, called from darkness to light, from ignorance to truth, from the kingdom of evil to the kingdom of God.

[7 : 1 1] And the church is called to purity. So we're called away from a lifestyle that is corrupt and damaging and defiling.

We are to abstain from the passions of the flesh, as you see here in chapter 2, verse 11. God's kingdom is a holy kingdom, a holy nation, as you see it described there in verse 9.

And all of that really makes perfect sense, because the church is united to God the Son, to Jesus Christ. The church is His bride, and the church is the family of God.

We're His. He is holy. And so it really does make perfect sense that we should be like Him.

And this is part of the reason why Peter can talk of the church in the language of exiles. You see that in a couple of places in the passage that we read. If we're set apart for God, then this world, this place where we are constantly battling against sin, this is not where we belong.

[8 : 27] And that language of exiles also reminds us that until Jesus returns, there's going to be a tension in regard to our holiness, because we're called to holiness, but we're not yet perfectly holy in every area of our lives.

This is where it's important to recognize that there's a distinction to be drawn in our holiness that at one level, there is a definitive setting apart of every believer, a definitive setting apart of the church.

So if you are a Christian, or if you become a Christian, an irrevocable change has taken place. A change has taken place that can never, ever, ever be undone.

You've been taken out of darkness into His marvelous light. And everything that Peter describes in verse 9 there, that you've been taken out of darkness into His marvelous light, you know, a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, all of that applies to you.

So there's a definitive aspect, but there's also a progressive aspect to it. I've spilt that wrong anyway, you know what I'm trying to say. If you're a Christian, if you become one, we are on this journey whereby as grace we are being changed.

[9 : 43] Bit by bit we put off sin and we put on more and more Christ likeness. And as Peter instructs us here at the start of chapter 2, we put away malice to sea, topocracy, envy, slander, and like newborn infants, we long for the pure spiritual milk that we may grow up into salvation.

So a key attribute of the church is that the church is holy. And there's a definitive setting apart as holy, a progressive transformation to become increasingly holy.

But in that work of transformation that God is doing, we have to be on guard against our holiness being compromised. Things that can corrupt.

That means being on guard against things that can corrupt. And that again is very obvious, it makes perfect sense. If we're following Jesus, we want to leave sin behind and there are all sorts of activities that are incompatible with a life of discipleship.

And many of these are actually also incompatible with life in 21st century Britain. So behaviour like theft, abuse, exploitation, murder, they're unacceptable in the church, they're unacceptable in our society and we recoil from all that kind of stuff and rightly so.

[11 : 06] But what I want us to see tonight is that alongside the fact that we want to avoid these big sins that everyone in our society recognises is wrong, we can also face a much more subtle danger in our discipleship.

As everybody in Lewis knows, the harris distillery has been a huge success over the last few years. First of all with the gin and then now with the whiskey and it seems to just be going from strength to strength.

I'm not really a thinker of either whiskey or gin. Whiskey belongs in baking as far as I'm concerned and I've not discovered any cakes that take gin so it's no use to me.

But although I'm not an expert in these things, I know enough to know that these have been hugely successful products. And a key to their success is their purity. A bottle of the Heroch is valuable because it's pure single malt harris whiskey and of course if you put a handful of dirt into that bottle it would no longer be pure.

But you don't need to put dirt into it to compromise its purity. All you need to do is add a drop of water and the moment you do that it becomes diluted.

[12 : 22] And I think that's the big danger we face as Christians today. So yes we absolutely guard against big scandalous actions that can bring disgrace on ourselves and others but although that could happen to any of us, we do recognise the truth that it's probably not likely to happen to most of us.

But what we've got to recognise is that that's not the only way that our holiness can be compromised. Our holiness can be diluted by all the influences around us and all the voices pulling within us.

And that's a trap that we can all fall into every single day. And sometimes we might even think that that diluting is a good thing and I want us to see tonight that it's not.

So in order to unpack that, this has been a super long introduction, not even really an introduction but we're finally getting to our two points which won't take as long as that. I want us just to unpack the fact that the church is holy for a reason and the church is holy for a purpose.

So first of all we need to see that the church is holy for a reason and the answer to that's very simple. The reason the church is holy is because we are gods.

[13 : 46] It's a very basic truth but it's so important to think about and it's highlighted in these verses. 17-19 of chapter 1 speaks of the church as being ransomed.

That's the language of ownership. The church has been bought. It's now under the ownership of God. That's reinforced in the words of 2 9, speaking of the church as a people for God's own possession.

That language of possession, that language of ransom is so powerful because it's telling you that your holiness came at a price.

It came at an absolutely astonishing price. It came, it was bought by the precious blood of Christ. And there's a crucial lesson here that I really want to press home to all of you.

It's reminding us first and foremost that if you're a Christian or if you become a Christian, your holiness, your set-apartness, your uniqueness, your preciousness, that is something that is done to you long before it is ever something done by you.

[15 : 09] And it's so important for us to recognize because we can so easily think that the holy people in church, they're the ones who are getting everything right. They're the ones who never have any doubts. They're the ones who never make any mistakes.

They're the ones who are just always maintaining the standard of your solid Christian maturity. They never stumble. They never wobble. We think that's the model of holiness.

That's not what makes you holy. First of all, first and foremost, the ground of your holiness is that Jesus poured out his blood for you.

He bought you and has made you his own. And this is where the gospel is so different to the way life can treat us. In life, so often, so often people are set-apart because they're smart.

So in school, you get that people at the top of the class are set-apart because they're smart. Sometimes people are set-apart because they're strong. They're able to compete really well in sports. Sometimes people are set-apart because they're good-looking and everybody can just see that they stand out from everybody else.

[16 : 16] Sometimes people are set-apart because they're successful and everything's gone really well in life or they're powerful and everybody wants to impress them and to be noticed by them.

You have this idea that to be set-apart, you've got to be strong, smart, beautiful, powerful, all these things. And of course, only a few people can achieve that.

In the gospel, you are set-apart because you are loved. So often we think of holiness in terms of approaching God.

We think, you know, holiness is about, you know, you've got to, you're holding this all of a mean, being able to approach God right. That's true to a certain extent, but sometimes it can put us down the wrong path because the magnificent reality of the gospel is that first and foremost, holiness is not about us approaching God.

It is about God gathering us. It's about God making it possible for us to be taken up in his arms because in the gospel, he is coming to get us and he's promised not to abandon us.

[17 : 34] He's the one who's never forgotten us and he's the one who gave his son to ransom us. All of this is summed up in Ephesians chapter five, which uses the image of marriage to speak directly about the holiness of the church.

Let me read it. Husbands, love your wives as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, that he might present the church to himself in splendor without spot or wrinkle or any such thing that she might be holy and without blemish.

These verses are all about the holiness of the church. But in these verses, what does the church do?

Nothing. Jesus does it all.

We are never the sanctifier. In terms of God working in our hearts, it's always God's own work.

[18 : 43] And all of this is reminding us just the incredible reality of God's love. And it's reminding us that God's love is a holy love.

And I really want to press this concept into you tonight. That's an incredibly important phrase and it teaches us a lot. Not least, it helps us to recognize that God's love is never a oh, it's fine love.

Lots of people want to reduce God's love to that as if to say, you know, oh, God loves me. It doesn't matter. Whatever. I'll do what I like. I know he loves me. It's all fine. And we just reduce God's love to this kind of like oh, it's fine kind of love.

That is not, that's not what the Bible reveals. That is not what God's love is like. God's love is a holy love in that he cannot ignore sin.

And that's incredibly important for us to remember. It's never just a flippancy towards sin. No one takes sin as seriously as God does.

[19 : 41] But what we also need to remember, what I want to see tonight is that the holy love of God is grounded in the gospel.

It's grounded in the fact that he cannot ignore sin, but in order to deal with it, he turned all the implications of sin onto himself when he sent his son to die for us.

And all of that is culminating in the incredible reality that, that when we talk about God's holy love, it's teaching us that God's love for you is never, ever diluted.

God is holy. But when is God diluted? Never. Never diluted in his truth, his justice, his majesty.

In God, you never, ever have anything less than absolute purity. That means that his love for you is only ever impeccably holy.

[20 : 49] No blemish, no hesitation, no diluting, just pure, eternal, burning love.

And it's so important to think about that. Do you ever feel like God's love for you has become watered down? Do you ever feel like, like your mistakes and your weaknesses, your doubts and your struggles are just like dropping, dropping more water, more dirty water in a bottle of pure whiskey?

It's probably the worst illustration I've ever used. But you know what I mean? Dropping some kind of thing to dilute something. Do you feel like, like, you know, or God's love's like pure water and you're just dropping sand and dirt into it.

Every time you make a mistake, it's just diluting his love for you further. You know, you think he just loves me a bit less now than he did before because my list of mistakes has just got longer.

So easy to think that God is like everybody else. First impressions are maybe positive, but as he gets to know us more, he sees more of the mistakes that we make and more things that will make him want to keep his distance.

[21 : 59] Is God like that? Oh, you know he's not like that. He's not like that because he's holy, his holiness is untouchable.

That means that his holy love for you is undilutable. And the only reason we can be holy as his church is because that love has reached us right where we are.

And that's why every time you feel like a failure or that you're stumbling in your Christian walking to press this tooth into your heart, that word holy, that word holy tells you how undiluted God's love for you is.

His love for you is only ever impeccable. The church is holy for a reason.

You're holy because you're his. But Peter also teaches us that the church is holy for a purpose. That purpose is twofold.

[23 : 09] It's summed up in two words, heard and seen. We've been set apart so that we will be heard.

You can see that there. We are to proclaim the excellencies of the one who's called us. It's not only that, we're not just to be heard, we are also to be seen.

That's what's continued on. So there's the call to proclaim the excellencies of God here. But now, as we live our lives, our conduct is to be honorable so that they may see your good deeds and glorify God.

Now, that involves controlling our passions, which is spoken about here in these verses and in the wider passage.

It involves just putting aside the things that are trying to destroy us anyway. And instead, striving for conduct that's honorable to God. We want our lives to be a public display of God's goodness.

[24 : 15] And of course, that makes perfect sense. We are gods with his family. We want that to be visible in the way that we live our lives. And one of the ways in which it's so important for us to maintain that is for us to recognize that our message and our conduct must not be diluted.

So the gospel message that we proclaim must not be diluted. So we are not going to water down the seriousness of sin. Sin is the single massive problem that humanity faces.

It is utterly destructive. It's awful. And it's so serious. We're not going to play down the urgency of our situation. Life is so frighteningly short.

Eternity is endless. And as Jesus calls you, you've got to respond. You've got to respond.

We're not going to be swayed by a culture that disagrees with us. God's word sets before us unchangeable ethical principles that we are going to maintain. We are not going to water them down.

[25 : 28] We must not limit the offer and invitation of the gospel. This is maybe one of the most important things of all. We can dilute the gospel by forgetting that the gospel is for everyone.

Absolutely everyone. And that message is to be proclaimed with boldness and with passion and with longing to see people come to trust in Jesus.

And we must never, ever, ever dilute or water down our understanding of the power of God's mercy and grace in Jesus Christ.

And we do that all the time because we look at people and we think they're not Christians and we think they're never going to be. Not to. Not to. We are so, so able and we are not going to dilute our confidence in the power of God.

The message that we proclaim must not be diluted. And the life of discipleship that we live must not be diluted either.

[26 : 32] So we are going to pursue financial and sexual purity as followers of Jesus. And that is so counter-cultural because we live in a world that's no different from all the other ages of history.

Obsessed with money and sex and will pursue it. No, not worrying about who they cheat and hurt along the way. God is calling us to a different path.

God is calling us to a life of compassion and patience and gentleness that's not contaminated with self-righteousness or judgmentalism or any of the other nonsense that can spoil things.

We're going to keep on putting away malice and envy and deceit and hypocrisy and slander and all the other things that Peter and the other apostles write. All of that's a constant battle.

But we want to do that because we want our lives to reflect the beauty and goodness of Jesus. A goodness that is not diluted.

[27 : 31] A goodness that is not watered down. We want our lives to display a holy goodness. And all of that is just another way of saying that the holy lifestyle of the holy church is one where we love one another.

And of course that's exactly what Peter's told us to do. He says, having purified your souls by your obedience to the truth for a sincere brotherly love, love one another earnestly from a pure heart.

And that life of holiness is constantly speaking to the people around us. It can be so hard to speak to people around us about Jesus.

But it's not hard to testify about Jesus because your life is constantly doing that. And we want to pursue a life shaped by the gospel because that will be seen.

And as it is seen, it will be powerful. Sometimes when we think of holiness, we can think of holiness almost as though our spiritual nose is in the air, like we're going around with this air of superiority.

[28 : 52] That's not holiness, that's hypocrisy. That's what the Pharisees displayed. True holiness is not having our noses in the air. True holiness is about having our hearts open to the people around us.

And as our hearts are open to the people around us, what are we doing? We're just reflecting the magnificent holiness of the God who opened his heart to us.

And so as we go into a new week together, we want to rest on the reason why you're holy. It's not only that you've done everything that Jesus has done, but we also want to seize the opportunity to fulfill the purpose for which he made you holy so that you can go to work or to school or into your community or into your homes, into whatever setting you are this week, and you can live a life that reflects the holy beauty and goodness and grace of Jesus.

The church is holy. And the more we cultivate that by the grace of God, the more people will be able to see that we have got something so amazing in our lives.

Amen. Let's pray.