

Called to Holiness

Isaiah 35, 1 Thessalonians 4:1–8

Let us first notice our Old Testament text, Isaiah 35. It tells us that with the coming of the promised Messiah, “the desert shall rejoice and blossom as the rose”; men would see “the glory of the LORD.” Whereas before, God’s people had only *heard* of him, now they would *see* him in person—in their immediate presence! This of course refers to the early disciples who walked and talked with the LORD and left us their testimony that they personally saw the Christ.

The only way that any event in history can be established is by the testimony of multiple eyewitnesses. When the Messiah came, as Isaiah 35 foretells, men would see “the *glory* of the LORD”—the true and living God. Remember Peter, James and John, who went up on a high mountain alone with Jesus? “He was transfigured before them. His face shone like the sun, and His clothes became as white as the light.”¹ Moses and Elijah appeared as well, and talked with the Lord. It was a holy moment that would be burned into the disciples’ memory permanently. They intuitively understood that the only proper response to such an amazing revelation was to worship. They did not think it unusual at all to worship the Lord Jesus, their mentor—truly human, yet truly divine. When they experienced this amazing encounter with the exalted Christ—the curtain of his humanity pulled back just a little to reveal the brilliance of his intrinsic glory—they fell on their faces in worship. Truly, this was no other than the divine Son standing before him, worthy of their worship. Here was an indubitable revelation of the living God in their midst. Suddenly, Moses and Elijah appeared with him and began conversing with the Lord. Peter, who often spoke before fully considering the import of his words, blurted out, “Lord, it is good for us to be here . . . let us make here three tabernacles: one for You, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.” Here were two important historical personages: Moses, the great prophet who led God’s people out of Egypt through the Red Sea—the man who penned the first five books of the Bible; and Elijah, the man who fearlessly stood up for the honor of the Lord against the false prophets of Baal on Mount Carmel. But these Old Testament figures were *human*, not divine. They are unworthy of worship. Peter’s suggestion to make three tabernacles was wrong, for Christ alone is worthy of worship. God did not let this teaching moment go to waste. While the words were still in Peter’s mouth, “behold, a bright cloud overshadowed them; and suddenly a voice came out of the cloud, saying, ‘This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased. Hear Him!’” The Father speaks from heaven and declares that the Son only should receive worship. Man must never worship anyone but God alone. Whenever anything in all creation becomes more important to us than Christ, that is idolatry

¹ Matt. 17

and must be renounced. “All idols underfoot be trod, the Lord is God, the Lord is God!”

Isaiah spells out the method we must follow to verify if a message is God’s infallible word or not: “To the law and to the testimony: if they speak not according to this word, it is because there is no light in them” (Isa. 8:20). He directs us back to the Bible: “To the law and to the testimony.” These are common synonyms for God’s word, as used in Psalms 19 and 119. The “law” is the תּוֹרָה, the law of Moses. The “testimony²” is God’s witness or attestation concerning himself, revealed in Holy Scripture. The biblical principle is that the testimony of two or three sworn witnesses, cross-examined in a court of law, establishes the truth or veracity of a historical event.³ When God speaks, he bears witness concerning himself. The three Persons of the Holy Trinity testify concerning one another. There is no higher authority! God has spoken, and the Christian is duty-bound to receive his witness as truth.

Returning to our Isaiah text, the prophet continues: “Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf shall be unstopped. Then the lame shall leap like a deer, and the tongue of the dumb sing. For waters shall burst forth in the wilderness, and streams in the desert.” In other words, with the coming of the Messiah there would come a time of Gospel prosperity. Both “Messiah” (Heb. מָשִׁיחַ) and “Christ” (Gk. Χριστός) mean *anointed one*. The One anointed by God and sent to earth to purchase our salvation is the eternal Son, Christ, the Lord. When he came, he would do miracles verifying his divine authority: curing the blind, deaf, lame and dumb. Jesus performed these miracles many times over in the Gospels, clearly proving himself to be the Messiah.

At this point our Isaiah text speaks clearly to our present subject: holiness: “A highway shall be there, and a road, and it shall be called the Highway of Holiness. The unclean shall not pass over it, but it shall be for others. Whoever walks the road, although a fool, shall not go astray.” When the Christ would come, he would usher in the way of salvation. Here is a clear reference to Christ, “the way, the truth and the life.”

The Christian life is the highway of holiness. When we follow Christ, he leads us in the way of holiness. Salvation is a free gift, and if we trust in him, we are eternally secure, but we must never become negligent and tolerate even “little” sins in our lives. “He that covereth his sins shall not prosper: but whoso confesseth and forsaketh them shall have mercy” (Prov. 28:13). O Christian, let us walk the way of holiness!

Let us now look at our New Testament text under three heads: (1) possessing our own vessel, (2) dealing with lust, and (3) depending on the Holy Spirit. First,

² תְּעִידָה, related to עֵדוּת, “testimonies” (Brown, Driver, Briggs lexicon (Logos Bible Software)

³ Matt. 18:16

1. Possessing our own vessel

Paul writes, “For this is the will of God, your sanctification: that you should abstain from sexual immorality; that each of you should know how to possess his own vessel in sanctification and honor.” The English Standard Version translates the word *vessel* as “body”: “that each one of you know how to control his own *body* in holiness and honor.” That is true enough, but remember: the original is “vessel.”⁴ Here, the human body is called a “vessel.” A vessel is a container. In English, we call a ship a *vessel*. A ship is a large container! There is a precious truth here. Our bodies are vessels, containers intended to carry something. What is that something?

When God created man, he made him of the dust of the earth, and breathed into his body the breath of life. Man is of two parts: *dust* and *breath*. The technical term for something made of two parts is *bipartite*. Some theologians argue that man is *tripartite*, composed of three parts: body, soul and spirit—the soul being the part that relates to other people, and the spirit being the part that relates to God. If that is true, then the question arises: do unregenerate people—people who are *not* born again—have a spirit, or is the spirit something that is given to a person in the new birth? Ecclesiastes says that “all is vanity and vexation of *spirit*.” In a fallen world all human beings, both regenerate and unregenerate, experience vanity and vexation of spirit, so clearly all human beings have a spirit.

It is much simpler and more consistent with the creation account to say that man is *bipartite*; that is, composed of two parts, body and soul. Our body is a vessel, a container, and what it contains is our immaterial part, our human soul. The words *soul*, *spirit*, *mind*, *conscience* and *will* are all used in Scripture to describe man’s immaterial part.

Gill observes that the body is called a vessel “because in it the soul is contained, and the soul makes use of it.” When a man dies, he takes his last breath, leaving an empty vessel. That vessel is important, for it is the creation of God, who invested it with dignity. At the resurrection that vessel will be raised a glorious body, fit to dwell forever in either heaven or hell. The human body is thus to be treated with dignity. We are to treat our own bodies and other people’s bodies with dignity. This is why we are called to live in peace. We are not to use violence against other human beings. Christians are to be a men and women of peace.

In 1 Peter 3:7, Peter addresses husbands, instructing us to give honor to the wife, as to the weaker “vessel.” Peter uses the same word as Paul: “vessel.” Peter is addressing Christian men. He is not being rude or sexist. He is making the simple observation that men in general have greater physical strength than women. This is why, at least until more recent times, it was men who fought wars, and men

⁴ σκεῦος

competed in sports only against men. Men were taught to be chivalrous: to behave courteously toward women. Women were to be protected. Society may have forgotten this, but Christians must not. We should teach our boys to treat girls and women with respect and honor. An honorable young man will not compete in a wrestling tournament if doing so requires him to compete against a woman.

This is not to deny that sometimes women become violent. Recently Norma and I were walking into a second-hand store. When we were just a few feet away, the door burst open. The security guard was trying to evict a shoplifter, a female. The woman turned violent and began to pummel the security guard with some heavy men's boots which she held in her hands. She was so intent on fighting the security guard that her purse fell to the ground, spilling its contents everywhere, but she didn't give up but kept fighting. She was not acting like a lady and did not want to be treated like a lady.

In our text this morning Paul writes "that each of you should know how to possess his own vessel in sanctification and honor." Calvin is very helpful; he observes that since Paul "addresses husbands and wives indiscriminately, there can be no doubt that he employs the term *vessel* to mean body." Unlike Peter, he is not instructing Christian men how to treat their wives. He is teaching that each of us—men and women, boys and girls—should learn how to possess our own body in sanctification and honor. In the present context "to possess our own body" means our own personal body in which we live, not our wife's or husband's body.

Secondly, consider

2. Dealing with lust

Paul continues: "not in passion of lust, like the Gentiles who do not know God." It seems as though Paul is talking about our time, with the prevalence of bawdy songs and risqué stage productions and TV and Internet! So much of what we are exposed to, whether intentionally or unintentionally, is meant to stimulate or excite our minds and hearts, especially in a sexual way. Plainly, it is wrong to go looking for pornography. But pornographers have found ways to get our attention when we are looking for something innocent.

Paul calls us to rein in all improper desire that allures us to break covenant with God. We must learn to discipline our body and bring it into subjection to the obedience of Christ. We should, in the words of Gill, "preserve it in purity and chastity; as the eyes from unchaste looks, the tongue from unchaste words, and the other members from unchaste actions; and to use it in an honorable way, not in fornication, adultery, and sodomy."

Larger Catechism 138 asks, "What are the duties required in the seventh commandment?" and answers: "The duties required in the seventh commandment are, chastity in body, mind, affections, words, and behavior; and the preservation of it in ourselves and others"

The first proof text for this teaching is our present text: 1 Thessalonians 4:4–5. Note well: this is the key text for our seventh-commandment duty of “chastity in body, mind, *affections*”!

God wants us not only to avoid lust, he wants us to exercise our heart unto godliness. He wants us to have *proper* affections—to love God with all our heart, and to love the things that God loves.

Jesus taught that “whosoever looketh on a woman to lust after her hath committed adultery with her already in his heart.”⁵ All sin begins in the human heart. Even to *desire* that which is wrong is sin. As disciples of Christ we are to want only what God wants and repudiate everything that God hates. Our trust in God is to be so complete that our will corresponds perfectly to his will.

The seventh commandment is “Thou shalt not commit adultery.” Adultery and fornication are both sexual sins, but they are not the same.

The seventh commandment and ninth commandment share something in common. They both prohibit the worst possible sin in their respective categories. The ninth commandment is “Thou shall not bear false witness.” Lying is wrong, but lying in a court of law, after having taken a public oath to “tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth,” is the most egregious form of lying. In the same way the seventh commandment forbids illicit sex. The most shameful sexual sin is breaking one’s marital vow that one has taken before Almighty God in order to violate the marriage covenant. The adulterer is at the same time breaking the seventh and ninth commandments. He is simultaneously committing adultery and breaking his solemn vow made to his wife before Almighty God and human witnesses.

God wants us to live lives of purity and chastity before him. If we are single, he wants us avoid fornication, lust and filthy daydreaming. He wants us to find our joy and delight in him. He wants us to make him our portion. In the words of Psalm 119H, “You, LORD, are the portion that I long for, I have pledged obedience to your word. I with all my heart have sought your favor; grant me grace, as you have promised, LORD.” Is God truly the portion that you long for? Are you *satisfied* with him, or are you looking for something that you think will satisfy you more? If you are looking for something more, then you are an idolater in heart.

If you are married, then God wants you to delight in your spouse. He instructs the Christian husband, “Let your fountain be blessed, and rejoice with the wife of your youth. As a loving deer and a graceful doe, let her breasts satisfy you at all times; and always be enraptured with her love” (Prov. 5:19). This advice applies to the wife as well: let your husband satisfy you at all times. To seek satisfaction elsewhere is to betray your husband—and betray your God! Regarding the virtuous

⁵ Matt. 5:28

wife God says, “The heart of her husband doth safely trust in her, so that he shall have no need of spoil” (Prov. 31:11). If a wife has a godly, caring husband, he will find that the heart of his wife will safely trust in him, so that she will have no need of spoil. “Spoil” may look very alluring in the short term, but its end is utter ruin.

All manner of popular culture today excites lust, but the person who is called to holiness guards his heart with all diligence, for it must at all times be totally devoted to God. Thirdly, consider

3. Depending on the Holy Spirit

Our text concludes: “For God did not call us to uncleanness, but in holiness. Therefore he who rejects this does not reject man, but God, who has also given us His Holy Spirit.”

Here is our high and holy calling: to *holiness*. This is the God who tells us, “Be ye holy; for I am holy” (1 Pet. 1:16). What our holy God requires is absolute perfection—to be like himself. This is utterly unattainable in our own strength! Fortunately, the God who requires holiness gives us his Holy Spirit.

Note that the Spirit given to the church is the “Holy” Spirit. He is the Spirit of holiness, the Spirit of sanctification. His purpose is, in the words of Gill, “to begin and carry on that work in them, to which uncleanness was the very opposite.” The Holy Spirit will never lead us into uncleanness. The Old Testament ceremonial law differentiated between clean and unclean animals. The pious Jew could eat only clean animals. It was forbidden to eat unclean animals. Even to touch such animals made a person unclean.

To indulge in uncleanness renders us unclean and unfit to worship a holy God. As the Psalmist wrote, “If I regard iniquity in my heart, the Lord will not hear me.”⁶ If we harbor impure, lustful thoughts in our minds and hearts, the Lord will not accept our worship. You may go through the motions of worship, you may dot all your I’s and cross all your T’s, you may follow the regulative principle of worship—that is, using only the worship elements that God has given us in Holy Scripture—but if your heart is not right with God, if it is devoted to the idol of uncleanness, your worship will be unacceptable. It will not receive God’s blessing.

The Spirit of God causes us to walk in God’s statutes. He is the earnest of our inheritance. He is the one who sealed us for the day of redemption. He enables us to walk after himself, and not after the flesh. He empowers us to live holy lives. The Spirit enables us to possess our own vessel with sanctification and honor.

The fact that we have been saved by Christ—delivered from the kingdom of Satan and brought into the kingdom of Christ—is the greatest motive and incentive to holiness. Christ leads his people in paths of righteousness for his name’s sake. If you are a follower of Christ, you are called to a life of holiness, living in obedience

⁶ Ps. 66:18

to God's commandments. He who died to deliver you from sin and rose again for your justification calls you to a live of holiness, in dependance on his Holy Spirit. Christian, you are called to holiness. Amen.