

# The Meaning of Holiness

by Charles Ewing Brown

*Charles Ewing Brown delves into the complex concept of holiness, exploring its origins in ancient religions and its evolution in the Old Testament. He discusses the paradoxical nature of holiness, where some things are considered more holy than others, drawing parallels to personal property ownership. Brown emphasizes the importance of entire sanctification, where Christians move from belonging to God in a general sense to becoming His private, personal possession through a second crisis experience. He also addresses the idea of sanctifying holy things through deep acknowledgment of their holiness, highlighting the significance of love as the fulfillment of the law and the essence of holiness in human nature.*

## Description

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## Transcript

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being set apart for God's use and ownership, characterized by moral purity and a deep sense of reverence and awe for God." - q: "Can a sinner consecrate themselves to God?" a: "No, a sinner cannot consecrate themselves to God because they already belong to God, but on the accursed side of the ledger due to their sinfulness." - q: "What is the significance of Christ becoming accursed for us?" a: "Christ becoming accursed for us enables us to understand the meaning of consecration and redemption, and sets a pattern for us to follow in consecrating ourselves to God." - q: "What is the relationship between holiness and love?" a: "Holiness is expressed through perfect love, which is the fulfilling of the law and satisfies God." - q: "What is the meaning of love to God?" a: "Love to God signifies a deep and unwavering devotion to God as a person, revealed to us in Jesus Christ, and inspires the intellect, heart, and will to cling to God." quotes: - "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom." - "Christ hath redeemed us from the curse of the law, being made a curse for us: for it is written, Cursed is every one that hangeth on a tree." - "Herein is our love made perfect, that we may h" applicationPoints: - "We must acknowledge the holiness of God and consecrate ourselves to Him." - "We must understand the significance of Christ becoming accursed for us and follow His example in consecrating ourselves to God." - "We must express our holiness through perfect love, which is the fulfilling of the law and satisfies God." keywords: - "holiness" - "sanctification" - "consecration" - "redemption" - "love" - "moral purity" - "ceremonial holiness" - "Christian perfection" - "perfect love" ---

Sometimes it baffles the keenest intellect to formulate a clear-cut definition of many of the most common ideas in our minds. One reason why these ideas are so hard to define is because a few of them stand in a perfectly unique position, having no other thing like them to which they can be compared. Stop for a minute and try to define life. The attempt will baffle most people, and those who succeed in satisfying themselves will probably fail to satisfy many others.

Prof. Rudolph Otto has written a massive book on The Idea of the Holy, in which there is scarcely any mention of the kind of holiness with which we are concerned at this time. A brief reference to Dr. Otto's views will, however, contribute to a better understanding of the present discussion. Dr. Otto thinks that men first came to be aware of the presence of God as a tremendous mystery that aroused fear and trembling in all who gained any perception of its reality. In the thought of these ancient, savage men there was at first no distinction between God and devil; for they supposed that both good and injury might come from that brooding mystery of power which gave man his life without any choice or foreknowledge on man's part and suddenly withdrew that life like d' man drawing his own breath back into his body.

Before we leave Dr. Otto we ought to be reminded that the historic development of religion always has been, and continues to be, along the lines he has indicated, and there is no other way to begin a genuinely religious experience but by evoking an awakening of the fear of God in a person's soul. "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom."

To understand the meaning of heart holiness, we must go back to this tremendous mystery of all ancient religions. In the Old Testament the holy thing is understood as the thing which belongs to God. Scan a good concordance and you note "holy ground," "holy gift," "holy garment," "holy thing," "holy crown," "a holy act," "holy anointing oil," and so we might go on at great length. Everything which belonged to the Tabernacle or the Temple belonged to God just as a man's house and furniture belong to that man. And everything which thus belonged to God was designated as holy.

HOLY AND MOST HOLY

At this point, there appears a paradoxical element in the idea of holiness which is likewise represented in the conception of personal property. That is, some things are more holy than others. From the standpoint of strict logic this is, of course, impossible. Since holy means the thing which belongs to God it is difficult to think of one thing as being more holy than another -- that is, of God's owning one thing any more than he owns another. Nevertheless, this same idea occurs in our own ordinary conception of property. A multi-millionaire owns a great factory and a vast estate. Literally, he owns everything in the factory and every blade of grass on the vast estate. But there are certain private belongings which seem to have a special reference to him. They are his clothing, his bed, or his spectacles. A guest in the mansion sits on chairs belonging to the master, uses furniture belonging to the master, reads books and papers belonging to the master, but he dare not intrude into the master's own bedroom where the master's own clothing is, carry the master's watch, and read the master's diary and personal account books. These are the master's peculiar, private, personal property. That is exactly the meaning of the text so often quoted: "Peculiar people, zealous of good works" (Tit. 2:14). That is also the meaning of the holy of holies in the ancient Temple. It was holier than the rest of the Temple because in a peculiar way it was the private, personal possession of God. Meditation on this subject will help us to understand the meaning of entire sanctification. There is a sense in which every Christian is holy, as has been so urgently asserted against the holiness people. It might seem that if they are holy then there is no further holiness possible for them, but such people are exhorted to go on into the holy of holies. "Having therefore, brethren, boldness to enter into the holiest by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way, which he hath consecrated for us through the veil, that is to say, his flesh; and having an high priest over the house of God; let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled from an evil conscience, and our bodies washed with pure water [our baptism]" (Heb. 10:19-22). Here the holy people are made holier; that is, they enter into the experience of entire sanctification. As regenerated Christians they belong to God in a general sense, but as those who have passed through the second crisis, they belong to God as a private, personal possession.

### SANCTIFYING THE HOLY THINGS

There is a sense in which men sanctify a thing that is already holy by their deep, heartfelt acknowledgment of its holiness. This sense is common to Scripture, but it is seldom used in our ordinary religious language, as it is so liable to misunderstanding. Moses and Aaron were rebuked for not sanctifying God before Israel (Num. 20:12; 27:14). Israel was commanded to sanctify the Sabbath (Deut. 5:12). "The first-born . . . it is mine" (Exod. 13:2). The people were commanded to sanctify the house of the Lord God (II Chron. 29:5). And this idea of sanctifying God and his name is repeated elsewhere in the Old Testament. Even in the Lord's Prayer we pray "Hallowed be thy name," which means to sanctify the name of God. The only way in which the people can sanctify the Sabbath, the Temple, and the eternal God is by solemnly acknowledging the holiness in their own hearts. And it is by just such an act of consecration that the awakened believer consecrates himself to God in the second crisis of salvation.

### TWO KINDS OF THINGS BELONG TO GOD

When the Israelites besieged the city of Jericho, Joshua devoted the entire place to God, declaring that not one person should escape, except the household of Rahab, and that not one article should be taken by the Israelites. "And the city shall be accursed, even It, and all that are therein, to the Lord: only Rahab the harlot shall live, she and all that are with her in the house, because she hid the messengers that we sent.

Keep yourselves from the accursed thing, lest ye make yourselves accursed. . . . But all the silver, and gold, and vessels of brass and iron, are consecrated unto the Lord: they shall come into the treasury of the Lord" (Jos. 6:17-19) It is almost inevitable that we should think of the accursed thing as belonging to the devil, but if we study the Bible closely we begin to discern that the devil is a usurper in God's world and not much of anything belongs to him. However, the subject of the curse in the Old Testament is too extensive for full treatment here. There was a curse whose only meaning was harmful, but just now we are thinking of the devoted, cherem, that is illustrated by the passage before us. It is the thing which God owns but cannot use because it is unclean or otherwise objectionable to him. Everything in Jericho was devoted to God, but all was subject to destruction except the holy things -- that is, the gold, silver, and such treasures as were not defiled by uncleanness, and therefore worthy of a place in the treasury of God. These were holy (Josh. 6:19). The Hebrew word for consecrated is qodesh, which means holy. It was the law in ancient Israel that "every firstling that cometh of a beast which thou hast; the males shall be the Lord's (Exod. 13:12). As a matter of course, therefore, the firstling of an ass would belong to the Lord according to the Law, but that animal was unfit for sacrifice. Therefore we read: "Every firstling of an ass thou shalt redeem with a lamb; and if thou wilt not redeem it, then thou shalt break his neck: and all the firstborn of man among thy children shalt thou redeem" (Exod. 13:13). In other words, the ass belongs to God, but since he cannot use it, it must be destroyed unless it is redeemed. This same idea is repeated in Exodus 34:20. In Numbers we read: "The firstling of unclean beasts shalt thou redeem. . . . But the firstling of a cow, or a firstling of a sheep, or the firstling of a goat, thou shalt not redeem; they are holy: thou shalt sprinkle their blood upon the altar, and shalt burn their fat for an offering made by fire, for a sweet savor unto the Lord" (Num. 18:15-17). In the Book of Leviticus we have the proposition laid down that "the firstling of the beasts, which should be the Lord's firstling, no man shall sanctify it" (Lev. 27:26). The reason no man could consecrate, or sanctify, a firstling was because it already belonged to God and could not, in the strictest sense of the word, be consecrated.

#### NO SINNER CAN CONSECRATE

This brings us up to the proposition that, strictly speaking, no sinner can ever consecrate himself to God. Following the scriptural line we have just studied, we see why this must be so -because every sinner already belongs to God, not as holy, but on the accursed side of the ledger: "Behold, all souls are mine; as the soul of the father, so also the soul of the son is mine: the soul that sinneth, it shall die" (Ezek. 18:4). Every sinner in this world belongs to God, but, being unclean, he is on the accursed side and as such there is no hope for him except that he shall be redeemed like the unclean animals of the Mosaic dispensation. Of course, the unclean animals of the Old Testament could not be changed so as to become clean and fit for an offering but the sinner is changed -- he is born again, made a new man in Christ Jesus, and as such he then comes to the place where he can consecrate himself and become a living sacrifice. Otherwise he remains under the curse. He must be redeemed or destroyed.

#### CHRIST BECAME ACCURSED FOR US

"Christ hath redeemed us from the curse of the law, being made a curse for us: for it is written, Cursed is every one that hangeth on a tree" (Gal. 3:13). This text enables us to understand the meaning of the following: "For their sakes I sanctify myself, that they also might be sanctified through the truth" (John 17:19).

We all know that Christ did not need to be purified from sin; for "he did no sin, neither was guile found in his mouth" (I Pet. 2:22). As our great High Priest he was "holy, harmless, undefiled, separate from sinners,

and made higher than the heavens" (Heb. 7:26). When he sanctified himself it simply meant that he consecrated himself to go over on the accursed side of the book of judgment and be made accursed for us. In doing so he did not become actually alienated from God; for "every devoted [cherem, accursed] thing is most holy unto the Lord" (Lev. 27:28).

Christ seems here to set a special example for us. Born without sin and living without sin, he did not need to be converted. Yet he set us a pattern when as a child he made a profession of devotion to the Father's business (Luke 2:49). So far as he was concerned, he did not need to be baptized; and yet in order to "fulfill all righteousness" as an example to us he was baptized by John in the Jordan (Matt. 3:15). And although he never knew the stain of carnality, he set us an example by consecrating himself to death, as recorded in John 17.

### HOLINESS AS MORAL PURITY

The study of the term holy in the Old Testament begins with its ceremonial meaning, its first application being to things, which, of course, have no moral quality. It was not long, however, until various persons were described as being holy because they belonged to God in some special sense. The priests of the sanctuary belonged to God -- they were holy. But if even an unclean animal was unworthy of sacrifice on God's altar because of its uncleanness, it is far more apparent that a man or a people who belong to God must be like him in moral character. Before tracing the moral nature of holiness it is important to note that use of the word holy in a ceremonial sense extends to the New Testament itself. Jesus said that the temple sanctifies the gold (Matt. 23:17). This is, of course, a ceremonial use of the word, as no moral purity can be attached to gold. The saints at Corinth, both Jews and Gentiles, were thoroughly familiar with the idea that the Gentiles were unclean -- ceremonially defiled -- to the Jews. There the question arose: Should a Christian husband or wife live with an unclean, unbelieving, heathen companion? The Apostle Paul says yes; in Judaism the unclean thing defiled the clean, but in this case the unbelieving husband or wife is sanctified by the believing companion, "else were your children unclean; but now are they holy" (I Cor. 7:12-14). The unbelieving partner is ceremonially cleansed from his heathen defilement, and his part-heathen child also is not partaker of the heathen defilement. Both are ceremonially clean and not repugnant to the true Israel of God. Of course, the Apostle is not preaching infant baptism, because, if the child of the heathen by being made ceremonially holy in this way was fit for baptism, by the same reasoning the unbelieving partner would also be fit for baptism; and this no theologian has ever maintained.

### JUSTIFIED CHRISTIANS CEREMONIALLY HOLY

It will solve one of the biggest problems in the doctrine of sanctification if we clearly see the point that this same idea of ceremonial holiness was applied to all Christians from the moment of their conversion. "As such were some of you: but ye are washed, but ye are sanctified, but ye are justified in the name of the Lord Jesus, and by the Spirit of our God" (I Cor. 6:11). This text has baffled holiness preachers for many generations; for the term sanctified is applied even before that of justification, and if a person is sanctified before he is justified critics are certainly warranted in questioning as to how he can be sanctified as a second work of grace after justification. The answer is very simple when we remember that all Christians are sanctified in the ceremonial sense that ancient Israel was a holy people. But in the same epistle the Apostle Paul pointed out the carnality in the hearts of these sanctified people, which proved that their sanctification was only formal and ceremonial and was by no means an entire sanctification of the nature in the complete endowment of moral purity.

## THE HOLINESS OF GOD

Regarded from a historical standpoint, it is evident that the first conception which the people of Israel would form of the holiness of God would be that of the supreme power which lays claim to a man's possession, and later they understood that he lays claim to the man himself. At the beginning, God's holiness was interpreted to mean his possessiveness; throughout long ages of time the idea was gradually revealed that the man whom God owned and controlled ought to be inwardly, morally, like God.

But what was God like? Revelations of the moral quality of God's holiness undoubtedly came slowly, like the rising of the winter's sun; little by little the light stole into the hearts of men, revealing that the holiness of God is his supreme moral excellence. It is the perfect balance of a supreme excellence of all moral attributes, conceived not as a mere transitory whim but as an eternal faithfulness -- a granite character of unchanging, moral perfection which, viewed from the standpoint of our world, projects itself as unchangeable and immovable will into all the future relations of God to his creatures.

Dr. William Newton Clarke has defined it as follows:

Holiness is the glorious fullness of God's moral excellence, held as the principle of his own action and the standard for his creatures...

Thus holiness is not God's character alone, or God's self-consistency alone, or God's requirement alone. It is all three. It is his character consistently acted out by himself and unalterably insisted upon with us men. [42]

## HOLINESS IN HUMAN NATURE

We do not doubt that the moral image of God restored to the soul of a Christian endows that person with a finite and limited image, or copy, of the divine perfections in their moral aspects. But here it is important to realize that we are viewing the reflection of an infinite sun as it is seen in the finite, imperfect, or incomplete, in the weak and fallible mirror of human nature. Viewed in this imperfect mirror, what is the form holiness takes?

Now we are at the point where most of the mistakes regarding Christian perfection have arisen. If we think of a reflection of a perfect image of God, free from all distortions of ignorance, narrowness of mind, feebleness of reason, limitations of social customs and conditioning we shall form a false definition of holiness in human nature; for we shall expect the reproduction of the very being of the infinite God within finite humanity, instead of a reproduction of his image. We shall be attempting to define human nature as free from human limitations and superior to human finiteness. All of this is futile, and this is perhaps the point where Christian perfection has been most liable to misconception and abuse.

## PERFECT LOVE

In his recent scholarly work on Christian perfection, Dr. W. E. Sangster emphasizes the inappropriateness of the term "Christian perfection." He thinks that the use of this term by the Wesleys was extremely unfortunate and that the expression "perfect love" would have been better from every standpoint. It would have been more scriptural, more philosophical, and likewise more acceptable to the general public. It would have relieved the doctrine of an unnecessary load of ridicule and misconception.

Elsewhere, it has been pointed out that love is the fulfilling of the law. [43] And I feel constrained to describe the form which holiness takes in the Christian as being expressed by perfect love. In this conception we are not dealing with Pharisaical conceptions of law and the philosophic tricks of moral casuistry. We drive the drill of reason and conscience through all the hard rocks of legalism into the pool of rich oil which lies in the heart of undivided love and devotion to God as revealed in Christ.

In this region we come into harmony with the popular thought and conscience of the whole world. Everywhere men really believe that "love is the fulfilling of the law;" and wherever it can be shown that man has acted with loyal and devoted sympathy and inward, personal attachment to the purposes of the law, all juries and all courts everywhere incline to be satisfied with the defense. The Scriptures teach that such an attitude satisfies God.

### THE MEANING OF LOVE

Love to God by no means signifies sentimental attachment to certain ritual, dogma, theories, or outward religion in and of themselves; it is love for God as a person as revealed to us in Jesus Christ. Such love inspires the intellect with appreciation of, and devotion to, the principles of the beloved. It inspires the heart with the devotion to the nature of the character of God as the holy one, and it strengthens the will to cling to the Holy One with an unwavering devotion.

In this earthly life there is no higher conception of man's relation to God. The man who loves God with a pure heart completely will not sin, because this attitude of his heart constitutes the complete fulfillment of God's demands upon him. Fifteen hundred years ago Augustine wrote, "It is good that I should cling to God"; and Jovinian, a monk of the same era, taught, as summarized by Harnack: "In him who occupies this relationship of faith and love there is nothing to be condemned; he can commit no sin which would separate him from God." [44] This is the message of the Apostle John, who wrote: "Herein is our love made perfect, that we may have boldness in the day of judgment: because as he is, so are we in this world" (I John 4:17). Ceremonial, or objective, holiness, then, is ownership by God. Subjective, or moral, holiness, however, is a love infused into our hearts by the supernatural work of the Holy Spirit and by that same Spirit made perfect, or complete.

### IS ENTIRE SANCTIFICATION A GIFT OR AN ATTAINMENT?

The church of the New Testament age understood very well that all the miracles of God's redemptive power must always be accepted upon the level of grace; in other words, they are gifts. When Paul insists so strenuously upon justification by faith he does so to emphasize the fact that salvation is a gift from God and nothing which anybody can do is sufficient to earn that blessing. But in the course of the weary ages of apostasy the idea grew up that such a way of salvation was too simple and too easy -- and we might also add, too infrequent. And so the idea gained ground in the ancient Catholic church that God does indeed give salvation, but he gives it only at the end of a long process of laborious striving and good works, which must precede salvation and make the recipient worthy of the gift. Or we might say, salvation is given to those who by a lifetime of laborious and ascetic works have proved themselves worthy of receiving it. In this way the idea grew up that all of life is to be employed as a preparation for salvation in the future life. The rarest saints receive this gift of salvation sometime in this mortal life. Others receive it at the moment of death, but most people must continue the process of preparation for salvation by an indefinite period of pain and suffering in purgatory before they are good enough to receive justification and salvation.

Martin Luther was able to see through this fallacy of reasoning. He argued that if justification is a gift and not a payment of wages, then there is nothing a man can do to make himself worthy of it except simply to put himself in a receptive attitude of faith. Thus Luther reasoned justly concerning justification, but neither he nor any prominent leader of that age was able to apply the same logic to the experience of entire sanctification. Here they employed the identical type of reasoning which had been used in the Catholic church to prove that justification was an experience usually attainable in the future life. How completely the form of theology followed the traditional pattern of Catholic dogma is shown in the following quotation from the Westminster Confession of Faith:

The bodies of men, after death, return to dust, and see corruption; but their souls (which neither die nor sleep), having an immortal subsistence, immediately return to God who gave them. The souls of the righteous, being then made perfect in holiness, are received into the highest heavens, where they behold the face of God in light and glory. [45]

As I have previously shown, these foundation Protestant creeds had held firmly and earnestly to the view that there is a sinful nature remaining in the regenerate, a nature which Wesleyan theologians call inbred sin. And now we read in the greatest of these creeds of English-speaking Protestantism that this inbred sin may not be removed until the end of life. Many trained theologians can see that the obscurity here is a complete reflection of the obscurity of Catholic theology regarding justification -- exactly at the same point. I might suggest that the mystery is made a little deeper because Protestant theologians did not dare to suggest that inbred sin is removed in any purgatory after death. The suggestion is that it is removed in the instant of dying, and most thoughtful people would be inclined to think that if this is so there must be something in the very nature of human flesh which makes holiness in this life impossible. To admit this is to turn back to Manicheism, one of the most ancient and dangerous heresies of the church, and hold that sin is an inherent part of human nature on its physical side. In other words, that would amount to denying the holiness of the human body of Christ or that he had come in a holy, human body. Because there is no human thought sharp enough to penetrate such theological contradiction the point is left obscure in order that each may draw his own conclusion.

The distinction between gift and attainment is not too difficult for presentation in popular thought. A certain child is gifted in music, but after years of training he is thought to be able to give a much finer performance than was possible at the beginning of his career. On the other hand, a person with no musical talent, if such a person were imaginable, could not make improvement. Our illustration is difficult because perhaps every normal being has at least a slight musical gift. Think of a human eye. A normal human eye has a gift of sight, and yet that gift may be trained to exceptional skill with a microscope, in distinguishing color, or otherwise in finding obscure things which others cannot see. But it is entirely based upon the gift of sight, without which skill is impossible.

And so we grant there is attainment of skill in the pursuit of holiness. That is the experience which Christians call growth in grace. It represents an increase of sensitivity, a sharpening of conscience, and a strengthening of judgment, such as belong to those "that are of full age, even those who by reason of use have their senses exercised to discern both good and evil" (Heb. 5:14). It also represents an increase of skill and ability in doing the work of the Lord, and all this is accompanied by an increasing strength of resolution by which the soul gradually settles into that final state of unchangeable devotion to God which will mark the end of probation.

If we are willing to accept the doctrine of entire sanctification in conformity with the fundamental idea of all Protestant theology and the essential teaching of the New Testament, we come to the view that entire sanctification is the completion of the work of redemption, and as such it must be a gift. At this point we dare not take the road of Roman Catholic tradition and hold regarding sanctification as they have done regarding justification -- that sanctification is the reward of a good life. It is contrary to the essential principles of Protestant theology to believe thus of any phase of the work of redemption. No fruit of the atoning passion of Christ can be reached by means of good works. Not so can we reach justification. Neither can we reach entire sanctification by that road. Entire sanctification comes to us as the result of the atoning passion of Christ. (See Hebrews 13:12.) No definition of sanctification is pressed here. It is urged, rather, that any kind of sanctification must be a kind purchased by the death of Christ without the gate; and as such it is not the reward of works, not the product of discipline and growth, but a gift accepted by faith.

Here we note another Catholic tradition not fully deserted by Protestant theology. In the New Testament, the grace of God is God's merciful, unmerited favor, his personal disposition of favor toward us; whereas in Catholic theology grace has been objectified in some kind of concrete thing standing alone in its own light and mediated to us through the sacraments. Protestant theology has inherited this Catholic conception of grace by conceiving sanctification as a gradual growth in grace. The grace here seems to be some kind of thing separate from God, which gradually accumulates in the soul until approximate sanctification is attained by all and marks the end of such a process. But grace is never a thing. Grace is God's personal attitude toward us and it is always a gift; it is never earned.

The trend of this discussion throughout has tended to develop the thesis that entire sanctification is a gift accepted by faith. It may occur any time that faith mounts the hill of promise, where its belief becomes sight and is melted into knowledge.

42 William Newton Clarke, *An Outline of Christian Theology*, pp. 89, 91

43 Cf. Charles E. Brown, *The Meaning of Salvation*, p. 70

44 Adolph Harnack, *History of Dooma*, Vol. V, p. 58

45 The Westminster Confession of Faith (1647), XXXII, Art. 1

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