

KEEPING YOURSELF CLEAN IN A DIRTY WORLD

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INTRODUCTION:

A Visit To Sodom

Elie Wiesel¹, a survivor of the Holocaust during World War Two, once told a Jewish tale about an old man – a just man who comes to the city of Sodom, in the hope that he might somehow save the city from God’s coming judgment.

The old man goes from street to street, from marketplace to marketplace, talking with anyone he meets. He stands on street corners shouting to anyone within the sound of his voice, “Men and women repent while you still can. What you are doing is wrong. It will kill you. It will destroy you.”

Of course everyone laughs at the foolish old man. But he goes on shouting anyway, until one day a child stops him and asks, “Don’t you see that what you are doing is useless?”

“Yes,” the just man answers.

“Then why do you go on crying out when no one is even listening to you?”

To which the old man – the just man replies, “I used to cry out because I once was convinced that I would change them. Now I go on shouting because I don’t want them to change me.”

Key Question(s)

This is the second in a two part series from Genesis 6, which raises an important question as we begin a new year: How does the Christian keep himself or herself clean while living in a very dirty world? How do you as Jesus said, live *in* the world without becoming *of* the world (Jn.17:15-17)? How exactly do you, as the Apostle Paul urged, keep from being squeezed into the world’s mold (Rom.12:2)? How do you keep your heart / soul from being polluted in a very dirty world?

Looking Back And Ahead

Last week we looked at the world in which Noah lived. Today we look at the man who lived in that world. Last week, we examined the corruption of the world in Noah’s day, where the LORD God we are told “*saw how great man’s wickedness on the earth had become, and that every inclination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil all the time*” (6:5). God as a result, was “*grieved that he had made man on the earth, and his heart was filled with pain*” (6:6). So grieved in fact that God made the decision to “*wipe*” (the way one might wash a dish clean and wipe it dry), the entire human race off the face of the earth (6:7).

And then we meet a man by the name of Noah; a man who while not perfect, is obviously unique among the people of his day. For only Noah we are told, “*found favor / grace in the eyes of the LORD*” (6:8). And only he, along with his entire family, was saved from the promised destruction to come.

Noah Took Time To Be Holy

All of which raises the question: How did Noah do it? How did he keep himself clean while living in a very dirty world? How did he live in the world without becoming of the world? How did he manage to keep his heart / soul from being corrupted by the moral pollution of that day? How did he? How do we?

¹ Betty Wein, *Reader’s Digest*; November 1987.

Well, in a word, the answer / key is something called “holiness”. Bottom line: Noah took time to be holy.

I realize that “holiness” is a word that in our culture is not used much. It is a concept in our day that is scoffed at more often than not. Even the suggestion of such an idea, is for the most part, to be viewed with derision, contempt, and patronizing scorn.

It conjures up terms like “holy roller”, or is used to describe people who are (supposedly) so heavenly minded as to be not earthly good. In the movies such folks are often portrayed and labeled as “Boy Scouts”. Holiness, it is safe to say, is not a virtue highly praised or desired – sadly, even in the church.

And yet, the strange irony is that even in our jaded culture, which naively believes we have somehow outgrown the need for such antiquated ideas, we really do long for such a virtue as holiness. In fact, whether we realize it or not, we mourn the loss of such holiness.

Why then do we become so upset when we see it violated in our leaders or public figures? Why the feeding frenzy over all the sordid details of Tiger Woods life recently? Why? At least part of the answer lies in the fact that the man with the squeaky clean image, an image he apparently worked to create, was living a very different private life than his public persona.

At one level, we understand that Tiger Woods is a man with feet of clay, as we all are. At another level, deep within our soul, we wish it wasn't so.

Holiness: we may devalue it, mock it, ignore its reality – but we really do long for it. While we may not agree on how to define holiness, we do recognize it when we see it in someone. People, whether they liked it or not, saw “it” in Noah.

Now, why was that? Because, the bottom line is that Noah took time to be holy. And it is obvious from Noah's life, that holiness was more than doing a good deed daily – even more than observing any religious ritual. For Noah knew that spiritual cleanliness, or what I am calling holiness, *flows out of a personal relationship with the living God.*

Holiness is not the result of observing any external act or religious ritual. Holiness / cleanliness of heart can only come from a living, breathing relationship with God Himself. It is a truth that old Noah seems to have grasped and lived out.

I. HOLINESS FLOWS OUT OF A PERSONAL RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD

“Religious Ceremony Won't Change The Heart”² (The Story Of Ole)

When Ole quit farming and moved, he soon discovered he was the only Lutheran in his new town of all Catholics. That was okay; his neighbors were gracious and tried to make Ole feel welcome in their small town. But Ole's neighbors did have a problem with his barbecuing *every* Friday. In those days, good Catholics were not supposed to eat red meat on Friday's – but the tempting aroma from Ole's grill was getting the best of them. Beside themselves, they got together and confronted Ole.

“Ole,” they said, “since you are the only Lutheran in this whole town and there's not a Lutheran church for many miles, we think you should join our church and become a Catholic.” Ole thought about it for a minute and decided they were right. So Ole talked to the priest, and they made all the necessary arrangements.

² Debi Zahn, “*Ceremony Won't Change the Heart*”; Preaching Today.com

The big day came, and the priest had Ole kneel. He put his hand on Ole's head and said, "Ole, you were born a Lutheran, you were raised a Lutheran, and now," he said as he sprinkled some incense over Ole's head, "you are a Catholic!"

Both Ole and his neighbors were happy – at least until the following Friday evening when the aroma of grilled beef once again wafted from Ole's yard. The neighbors went to talk to him about this, and as they approached the fence they overheard Ole saying something strangely familiar to the steak: "You were born a beef, you were raised a beef, and now," he said as he sprinkled salt over the meat, "you are a fish!"

The point: religious ceremony is fine, in as far as it goes – but religious ceremony cannot change a human heart. Only a genuine relationship with the living God can. *Such a relationship, as Noah's life shows us, begins by grace through faith in God and His covenant promises.*

I. HOLINES FLOWS OUT OF A PERSONAL RELATIONSHIP WITH THE LIVING GOD

A HOLINESS THAT BEGINS BY GRACE THROUGH FAITH

Grace: Nothing More – Nothing Less – Nothing Else

Anything connected with our salvation and our genuine relationship with the living God of the Bible always begins and ends with grace (see v. 8). Grace: nothing more – nothing less – and nothing else.

Why is that? Because, Scripture from beginning to end makes it abundantly clear, "*There is no one righteous, not even one.... for all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God*" (Romans 3:10, 23). That's why holiness must begin and end with grace. Grace – God gives it, or you don't get it.

Grace – unmerited favor – "God's Riches at Christ's Expense", as it sometimes is referred to. God doesn't play favorites, but He certainly does love to extend favors to undeserving people. It's called grace. "*Noah found favor(grace) in the eyes of the LORD*" (Gen. 6:8).

And because God (v. 8), extended grace to Noah – Noah (v.9) is declared (by God) to be a righteous man. The order is intentional and crucial to grasp. The text doesn't say Noah found favor / grace *because* he was a righteous man. No, Noah was righteous *because, and only because,* he found grace in the eyes of the LORD.

Noah we are told (v.9), was declared by God to be a righteous man. That speaks volumes about his relationship with God. It doesn't mean he was perfect or without sin. What happens after the flood in Genesis 9 where Noah gets drunk and is found in his tent wearing nothing but his birthday suit, blows that idea into a million pieces. It simply means that Noah was in right standing, in a right relationship with his God.

Holiness always begins and ends, by grace – a gracious gift of forgiveness, cleansing from your sin. It is grace by which God declares you to be righteous – in right standing with Him. But grace like any gift has to be personally received for it to be of benefit to you or me.

A Christmas Gift Waiting For You Under The Tree

It is something like that Christmas gift you found under the tree with your name on it when you were a kid. On Christmas morning the only thing you are really interested in knowing is what gift or gifts under the Christmas tree have your name on the tag. And when you find one with your name on it your heart is filled with hopeful anticipation at the prospect of opening the gift. And regardless of your family's tradition, when you get that gift in your hot little hands, what do you do? Well, generally, you begin to rip the wrapping paper off as fast as you can. But as you do, your Father slaps your hand and says, "That will be \$29.95 first." Is that what happened to you? I highly doubt it. Why? Because: it wouldn't be much of a gift, if you had to pay for it.

Now the gift may be extremely expensive (and grace is). But a gift by definition is something that the giver offers without charge to the recipient of the gift. The recipient of the gift simply has to receive it – and hopefully say “Thank-you”.

Recap & Transition

I. HOLINESS / CLEANLINESS FLOWS OUT OF A PERSONAL RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD

A Relationship That Begins By Grace Through Faith In God & His Covenant Promises

And...

A Relationship That Grows As We Learn How To Walk In Fellowship With Him (v. 9)

While the wicked (seed of Cain / Satan) corrupted the earth, Noah we are told “*walked with God*” (6:9). Noah didn’t walk ahead of God. Noah didn’t drag his feet and lag behind God. Day after day, week after week, month after month, year after year, for many years – Noah walked with God.

Dr. Hess the pastor of Ward EPC for many years, and his wife Margaret used to take a daily walk together; almost every afternoon – rain or shine. That daily routine of walking together speaks volumes of the kind of relationship they had with one another.

In Noah’s case his “walk” speaks of his daily habit of spending personal, uninterrupted time with God. It speaks of his fellowship, his communion, his intimacy with God. Nothing fancy – just drawing near and spending time together on a regular basis. “*Noah walked with God.*”

“I Have Just Come Near.”³

Stuart Sacks, while serving as a missionary in Paraguay, tells of a Maka Indian named Rafael, who one day came and sat on his front porch. Sacks, was eating in his home at the time, and went out to see what the man wanted. The man responded by saying, “I don’t want anything, I have just come near.” Sacks understood what Rafael was saying, but not the significance of his words. So again, he asked what he could do for his visitor, but the answer was the same. “I don’t want anything I have just come near.”

Sacks later shared the incident with a local veteran missionary. He explained that it was Rafael’s way of honoring him. The light bulb went on in Sack’s head, and he realized that Rafael really didn’t want anything. “Rafael”, Sacks said, “just wanted to sit on my porch. He found great satisfaction and pleasure just being near me.”

Holiness flows out of a grace initiated relationship with God, and it grows as we learn how to “just come near”, and fellowship with Him.

Noah’s Secret: His Walk

A large part of the secret to Noah’s success, what made him unique, different from his contemporaries was his daily walk with the LORD. “*Noah walked with the LORD*” (6:9). And because he did, he was able by God’s grace, to keep his soul clean while living in the midst of a dirty, corrupt world. His holiness flowed out of his relationship with God – a relationship that was living, active, growing because of his daily fellowship, communion with God. Noah walked with God.

Walking is not fancy or exciting, just putting one foot in front of the other, over and over again. Walking is not fancy or exciting, but eventually it does get you there. As my pastor used to remind me in the early days of my Christian life, “It is not how high you fly that matters – but how straight you walk”. It is called holiness, cleanliness with God and before other people.

³ Stuart Sacks, “*Honoring Our Lord*”; Preaching Today.com

Take Time To Be Holy⁴

William Longstaff understood the importance of holiness when he penned these words...

*Take time to be holy, speak oft with Thy Lord;
Abide in Him always, and feed on His Word.
Make friends of God's children; Help those who are weak;
Forgetting in nothing, His blessing to seek.*

Noah's holiness flowed out of his relationship with God; a relationship that began by grace, and a relationship that grew as he learned to walk with God.

Noah was able to keep himself holy, clean in an unclean world, because he also believed and acted upon the truth that...

II. HOLINESS IS AN ISSUE OF YOUR CHARACTER

Vanderbilt University

Back in 1999, Gaynelle Doll⁵ wrote an article on Vanderbilt University and their "honor code". It seems that for many years incoming freshmen would pledge to do their own academic work with integrity, and to report those who did not to the student-run honor council.

The students' signatures were then placed on display in the lobby of the Sarratt Student Center throughout their four years at the university. Alongside the students' signatures was also found not only a statement of the university's honor code – but also a quote from the man for whom the building was named – Madison Sarratt.

Madison Sarratt, was for many years the Dean of Men, and a teacher in the Mathematics Department. Before giving an exam, Sarratt would tell his students the following...

"Today I am going to give you two examinations, one in trigonometry and one in honesty. I hope you will pass them both. But if you must fail one, let it be trigonometry. For there are many good (people) in this world today who cannot pass an examination in trigonometry. But there are no good (people) in the world who cannot pass an examination in honesty."

I don't know how things function today at Vanderbilt – but at least as far as the not-so-distant past is concerned – they as an administration and faculty, understood the importance of something called "character".

And so did Noah. And because he did, Noah was not only "righteous" before God, but he was also "blameless" before his contemporaries. It is a word that speaks volumes about his character, and it is why Noah had the kind of testimony he did before his peers. "*Noah was a righteous man, blameless among the people of his time*" (6:9b).

Having a credible testimony before our peers

Noah was "blameless" among the people of his time. While he was a righteous man - a statement that refers to his relationship with / his standing before God, Noah was also declared to be "blameless" – a statement that refers to his standing – his testimony before his peers. As with the word righteousness, describing Noah as blameless does not mean he was perfect or without sin in his public life. When God calls Noah "*blameless among the people of his time*," He is describing Noah's character. There were no major holes, no blatant /

⁴ William Longstaff, "Take Time To Be Holy".

⁵ Gaynelle Doll, *Vanderbilt Today* (Summer/Fall 1999).

glaring discrepancies in his character. As a result his life was lived out in an upright/ blameless manner before his contemporaries. What people saw – was what Noah really was.

The word “blameless” is also used in book of Leviticus to describe the sacrificial animals used in worship; animals which per God’s command were to be without any blemish or defect.

The point: Noah had an unblemished testimony among / before the people of his day – those he rubbed shoulders with – those who knew him well in the community. And he had such a testimony in the community because he was a man of character. Noah was looked upon as “blameless” because he was a man of moral substance – not someone just concerned with his external image. *“Noah was a righteous man, blameless among the people of his time.”*

Influencing Others

Frederick W. Robertson served as a pastor in Britain in the mid 1800’s. Robertson once visited a shopkeeper who was a member at the church where he served. During their visit the shopkeeper showed his pastor a picture of Robertson on the wall. He then explained that whenever he was tempted to sell someone shoddy goods, he would look at his pastor’s picture and was strengthened to do the right thing by his customer. Why? Because his pastor was a man of character – both in his word and in his walk.

Oswald Chambers

Oswald Chambers, another voice from the past put it this way...

“When you meet a man or woman who puts Jesus Christ first, knit that one to your soul.”

Noah’s Contemporaries

Noah’s contemporaries may not have necessarily like Noah. His contemporaries may have made fun of Noah, given him a hard time at work, etc. But Noah’s contemporaries knew he was the genuine article – the real McCoy. He was no self-righteous phony. His name / reputation / testimony in the community was “blameless”. *“Noah was blameless among the people of his time.”*

And Noah lived that way in a day that was every bit, if not more difficult to live in than anything we encounter in our day.

I have, as I’m sure you have also, often heard Christians, both in the pew and in the pulpit, say something like this: There has never been a more difficult time to live for Christ than in our day. There has never been a more difficult time to raise a family than in our day. There has never been a more difficult time to keep yourself pure as a young person than in our own time. I’m not sure Noah would agree.

Noah lived in a world that was so bad, that not only did God run out of patience, but Noah lived to see the destruction of the entire human race. All of which says, that not only can it be done, but that our world isn’t any more difficult or corrupt than it has always been. *“Noah was blameless among the people of his time.”*

Noah’s Motivation

Notice a large part of Noah’s motivation: *“Noah had three sons”* (6:10). Noah, the man so concerned with such things as personal, integrity, character, holiness – Noah, the man who kept himself “clean” / blameless in the midst of a dirty world, before his contemporaries – did so for a reason.

Noah did so, not only because his God was watching (v.5) – not only because his culture was watching (v.9) – but because his kids were watching as well (v.10). And his kids wanted to know if this Christianity stuff is real or not. His kids wanted to know if what pop had was genuine or not.

Recap & Transition

II. Holiness Is An Issue Of Character

A. Character that gives you a credible testimony before your contemporaries

B. Character that also gives you a credible testimony as it is lived out before your watching family

The Case For Christ⁶

Author, pastor and onetime atheist Lee Strobel tells the story of not only the change God made in his life, but the impact that change made upon his daughter.

Strobel's daughter Allison was 5 years old when he became a follower of Jesus. And up until that point in her young life, all she had known for those five years was a dad, who by his own admission was profane and angry. For example, Strobel remembers a time when he came home one night and kicked a hole in the living room wall, just out of anger with life. Whenever such things happened (and they did often), Allison would hide in her room to get away from her dad.

Five months after Strobel gave his life to Jesus Christ, his daughter went to her mom and said, "Mommy, I want God to do for me what he's done for Daddy." "Why did she want to do that?" he asked.

Strobel explains his daughter's actions this way: "She'd never studied the archeological evidence (regarding the truth of the Bible). All she knew was her used to be this way – hard to live with. But more and more her dad was becoming this way. And if that is what God does to people, then sign her up.

Application

Keeping ourselves clean while living in a dirty world, does not come from such things as: eating a bran muffin every morning, or drinking only bottled water, or only eating foods organically grown. It is the result of a living, active relationship with God himself. A relationship, that begins by grace through faith and grows as we walk in fellowship with Him. And out of that relationship, a holiness of character / internal integrity of soul begins to emerge. Such character lived out over time, gives us a credible testimony before our peers and before our kids.

One of the sad ironies of our own day is that we as a culture, even Christians in this culture are so obsessed with keeping our bodies healthy (which is fine to a degree) – but not keeping our souls / hearts healthy. We are so concerned with cleaning up / saving the planet (which again has merit) – but not in cleaning up / saving our souls from being polluted. We are so concerned with so-called global warming – but our souls are far too often frigid toward the things of God.

Recap & Transition

I. Holiness flows out of a genuine relationship with living God

II. Holiness is an issue of character

And...

III. HOLINESS IS EVIDENCED BY THE WAY YOU DO WHAT GOD ASKS YOU TO DO

It is called obedience... and obedience Means Following Through

⁶ Lee Strobel, from a sermon "The Case for Christ".

A Strange Kamikaze Pilot

Former Notre Dame football coach Lou Holtz defines obedience or follow-through this way:

“The kamikaze pilot who flew 50 missions was involved – but never committed.” Why? Because, there was no follow-through on his assigned task - no obedience to his orders.

HOLINESS IS EVIDENCED BY THE WAY YOU DO WHAT GOD ASKS OF YOU

A. An Obedience / Follow Through *In Everything* God Asks Of You – Asks You To Do

B. An Obedience *In The Manner* In Which God Asks Of You

God’s Instructions

What were God’s instructions to Noah? He was told to build an ark, according to God’s specifications. He was commanded to build an ark in order to save himself, his family, and those creatures God would bring. He was commanded to build the ark because God was going to destroy every living thing on the earth.

God not only gave Noah very specific instructions on how to build the ark, but also gave Noah sufficient time to complete the task assigned to him.

Noah’s Obedience

And what was Noah’s response? He obeyed everything God asked of him, in the manner God asked him to do it. The point is made not one time, two times, or even three times, but four different times in the Genesis account.

“Noah did everything just as God commanded him” (6:22).

“Noah did all that the LORD commanded him” (7:5).

“Noah entered the ark... as God had commanded Noah” (7:7, 9).

“The animals were male and female as God had commanded Noah” (7:16).

Noah *did* what God told him to do. Noah did *everything* God told him to do. Noah did everything *just as* God commanded him to do. The account stresses Noah’s absolute, complete, unqualified obedience.

It not only speaks of Noah’s completion of a required task, but the manner in which he did the task – carefully and completely. And the manner in which Noah completed his assigned task speaks volumes about his heart attitude in serving God. He offered his life to God, not in partial, but in complete obedience. He followed God exactly.

Following Jesus Exactly⁷

David Gibson, a pastor from Idaho Falls, Idaho, tells of the day when his friend bought a 19 foot jet boat and invited him along for the maiden voyage. The boat was sleek, made of steel, and fitted with a V-8 engine. The two men put the boat in the North Fork of the Snake River. The water at that time was quite low because of a drought and heavy irrigation.

⁷ David Gibson, “*Following Jesus Exactly*”; Preaching Today.com

David's friend eased the throttle up until they were going 35 miles per hour. They grinned at each other as they raced across the water's surface. That is until they unexpectedly hit a hidden sandbar, and the boat came to an abrupt stop. The two men stepped onto the sandbar, which was barely covered with one inch of water.

Another boater came along, and after three hours of digging and pushing, they once again had the boat floating in the open channel. The boater who rescued them offered to lead them back to the landing since he knew the river well. He instructed the two men to follow exactly behind him so that they would avoid any other of the numerous, hidden sand and gravel bars.

The leader pushed his boat up to 35 miles per hour, David and his friend fell in behind the leader, and once over again they enjoyed the thrill of skimming over the water.

After a few minutes however, David's friend steered their boat just a few feet to the right of where the lead boat had gone. Within seconds, they hit a gravel bar and injured when they were catapulted involuntarily into the windshield. When the lead boat came back, the driver reminded them, "I told you to follow me."

Sounds like something Jesus would say.

Holiness is evidenced by the way you do what God asks you to do. It is called follow through or obedience in everything God asks of you and obedience in the manner God asks of you. Bottom line: It is about following Jesus and his lead / instructions exactly.

Conclusion:

How do you keep yourself clean in a dirty world? You do it the same way Noah did it in his day. By remembering... (1) Remembering God is watching; (2) Remembering your friends are watching; (3) Remembering your family / kids / grandkids are watching

And because Noah never lost focus on those realities, He was declared by God to be:

- * A righteous man who walked with God
- * A man who was blameless among the people of his time
- * A man who raised a family
- * A man who by the grace of God, did so in the midst of a corrupt and violent world

Bottom Line: *He took time to be holy!*