

## Life's Goal

### 1 Thessalonians 3:13–4:3 (NRSV)

And may *the Lord* so strengthen your hearts in holiness that you may be blameless before our God and Father at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his saints. **1** Finally, brothers and sisters, we ask and urge you in the Lord Jesus that, as you learned from us how you ought to live and to please God (as, in fact, you are doing), you should do so more and more. **2** For you know what instructions we gave you through the Lord Jesus. **3** For this is the will of God, your sanctification.

**Introduction.** Where are you headed? When you finish your journey here in earth, where do you hope to be? At the end of your journey, where do you believe God wants you to be?"

Over the past couple of weeks we have been in a series entitled, "The Life You Hoped For." If we are to have the life we hope for, it would seem it is important for each of us to be headed toward the destination we hope to reach. Hopefully that destination is the same one that God has in mind for us, right?

In response to the question of our destination, I suspect that some quickly answered that question something like this – "*I hope to be in heaven with the Lord.*" While I would consider that to be a worthy and desirable destination, I want to suggest to you this morning that God has in mind for you a different sort of destination for you.

In his letter to the church in Thessalonica, Paul shared about God's desired destination for us. Paul prayed that the people who follow Jesus would reach experience God's desired goal for them which is *holiness or sanctification*. God's will for you and me is that we be holy. When it is all said and done, God wants us to be holy. Are you on the journey to holiness?

### **The plan.**

Nearly 3500 years ago, God decided it was time to execute a central element of his plan to redeem his creation. He had chosen a band of powerless slaves living under the control of the powerful Egypt to become a worshipping community through whom the world's redeemer would eventually come. So God called on a fugitive from the law to go to Egypt to confront the Pharaoh and lead them to the land of promise.

So when Moses confronted the King of Egypt, he gave God's directive": "*Let my people go that they might worship me*" (Exodus 7:16). After quite a tussle with powerful nation, the nation of slaves was asked to leave. After a couple of months, God led them to a place where he began shaping them into the worshipping community He desired. In that place, he shared through Moses that He (God) was holy. Then God gave them a directive that was central to all they were supposed to be and to do. Listen closely to what God said them: "*Consecrate yourselves and be holy, because I am the Lord your God. 8 Keep my decrees and follow them. I am the Lord, who makes you holy*" (Leviticus 20:7–8). That same directive is one that the NT picked up on and became central to those who would follow Jesus.

Nearly 300 years ago, God tapped on the shoulders of a short, Anglican preacher to lead in a revival movement that shook the England and America. John Wesley (have you ever heard the name) understood his mission and those who were part of his movement *to transform the nation and spread scriptural holiness throughout the land*. Early Methodism became known as a holiness movement. John Wesley maintained that true Christians marked by "*happiness and holiness.*" (Are you happy? Are you holy?) He clearly spoke of complete sanctification or holiness as the goal of every believer.

As one who is on this day worshipping in a Methodist congregation who traces its origins back to Wesley, are you on the road to holiness?

### **What is holiness?**

I suspect that many, if not most of us, want to travel the road to holiness but we face a huge obstacle. We don't know what holiness is. The idea of holiness for some makes them a bit nervous they think of some thinking of themselves as holier than others. Some imagine holiness largely negative and restrictive, consisting of a lifestyle guided by things we can't do as a Jesus follower. Others may associate holiness with the modern "holiness" movement which spawned a group of people who unfortunately to the mainstream appear kind of "backward" with their type of dress, hairstyles and simplicity. Others may think that holiness has something to do with "holy rollers" who are some rather emotional worshippers.

So I guess we need to understand what holiness is so we can know if we are on the right trail. What is holiness?

Several years ago, Patty and I had an opportunity to travel to the Holy Lands. During our tour, we visited Haifa's diamond district. There we saw artisans cutting, crafting and polishing diamonds. They carefully selected how they would shape them and placed them on the stones that would shape and shine them.

Scriptural holiness is like a multi-faceted diamond. As we examine it we see its various components.

Holiness is both a **divine work and a human work**. No one can be holy without God saving and grace-filled action. Just as you heard from the story of the Hebrews where God identified himself as the one who made them holy, God continues that sanctifying work in us. Paul's final prayer in this letter was "*May God of peace himself sanctify you entirely.*"

God's sanctifying work though requires our cooperation. God does not wave a wand and you are magically made holy. Rather, we must open our lives to God's work, commit ourselves to the journey and live out a life of holiness. Paul expressed in scripture lesson: "*you know how you ought to live so do it more and more.*"

Holiness is **both internal and external**. Paul prayed that **God would strengthen the people's heart in holiness**. Holiness begins as a matter of the human heart. As God moves in the heart, it becomes the generator that transmits holiness into our thoughts, words and actions. If it stays only in the heart, holiness is incomplete. If holiness is merely some internal condition or feeling and does not express itself in how we think and act, it is hugely deficient. A believer, who isolates herself from others to develop internal holiness and does not engage in the world, is hardly the holy person that God has in mind. Yet if our actions are intended to make us holy, something is missing. If it does not start from the heart, it is artificial.

This thing called holiness has three important aspects.

Holiness is often associated with **being clean and cleansing**. In our scripture lesson this morning, Paul connected being holy with blamelessness. Those who are holy live without being accused by God of wrong. It is one thing as in **justification to be given a favorable ruling** before God but **it is another to be innocent and clean**. In another place Paul spoke of how Christ makes the Church holy by cleansing her from all spots and blemishes (Ephesians 5:25-27).

Holiness in part has to do with clean and moral thinking and living. Holy people are those who seek to live right before God. One of the great challenges that faces the church is that many who serve in the world are found guilty of many offenses. They live with highly visible blemishes that weaken their witness and the witness of the church – infidelity, greed, embezzling, destructive anger, divisiveness, mean-heartedness, etc.

Now we know that *none of us as believers are without fault and nearly all of us falter from time to time or frequently*. John Wesley who spoke often of holiness said it was not "**sinless perfection**." But those who are living into the holiness of God are those who see their living transformed and become cleaner in the living and thinking. Wesley said that God's action of making us holy means we are "*saved from the power and root of sin and restored to the image of God.*"

Remember the band of slaves God delivered from Egypt that God called them to be holy? In the Exodus story, God shared these words with them: *For you are a people holy to the Lord your God. The Lord your God has chosen you out of all the peoples on the face of the earth to be his people, his treasured possession* (Deuteronomy 7:6). That and those who are holy are set apart for a special relationship with God – whether it is a holy day to remember God, a place of worship like this sanctuary or a human being or group to be in relationship with God. Holy people have a living and active relationship with God. **They are set apart for God to** live in communion with God.

Think of it this way. You may have many people you would consider friends. But it is likely there are a few who you consider “close friends.” You have a more intimate relationship with them. You may go to dinner together, to the movies, hang out at each other’s house, call or text about things in your life. They are set apart as special friends.

**Holy people are set aside by God as special friends.** Now the good news is God is not exclusive regarding His special friends. He opens the door for all of us to experience holiness and enjoy this relationship.

But this relationship is not a “holiness country club” where we merely hang out with Jesus and have all our spiritual needs massaged and met. Holiness is about being set apart for God for holy purposes. The band of Hebrew slaves were set apart as God’s treasured possession to serve as those who would bless the world and introduce others to God’s redemptive work.

Paul wrote to his protégé, Timothy: *In a large house there are articles not only of gold and silver, but also of wood and clay; some are for special purposes and some for common use. 21 Those who cleanse themselves from the latter will be instruments for special purposes, made holy, useful to the Master and prepared to do any good work* (2 Timothy 2:20–21).

At our house, **Patty has three different types of dishes.** In our pantry she stores the paper plates and plastic ware that when we use it for a picnic or casual gathering, it is tossed. Then there are the everyday dishes and silverware we use daily and place in the dishwasher to clean. Then she has her china and special silverware – some is silver. She only uses it on special occasions, typically when we have guests or a celebratory meal.

Paul is saying that **God makes us holy for special use in his kingdom.** We are set apart for service and ministry. He makes us holy so we can be used for his purposes in the world.

Holy people are those being cleansed by God so that they are pure and blameless. Out of that purity, holy people are able to enjoy a more intimate relationship with God. God sets holy people apart for service that He designs.

Betty spent her working years as one who did pedicures and manicures. She was faithful to her Lord and church. When she retired, she began to devote herself to serve a special group of people for whom she had a deep love and passion – the elderly who were home bound. Without any fanfare from her church, she would regularly visit with them. Often she would kneel at the feet of those who were hardly flexible anymore and care for their feet – washing the feet of God’s children. Betty was/is a woman who has been set apart by God for a special mission. She had lived into that holy calling and is moving toward entire sanctification.

### **Toward the Goal.**

I am sure that all of here someday hope to be present with the Lord. We want heaven to be our home, the new earth and new Jerusalem where God dwells. Yet there is a higher destination for our lives now – to be holy. It is God’s will for you that you be made holy.

**The journey toward holiness begins the moment we are converted** – say, “Yes” to Jesus’ invitation to receive him and his forgiveness. The holiness journey continues from that point forward as we receive and live into the grace God offers. Our lives change and our mission for God continues.

Where are you on this journey toward holiness? Do you know Jesus Christ? Are you stalled in your journey? Is there a huge barrier you can’t overcome? Come to Jesus.