

# SWIMMING AGAINST THE TIDE

## Being Holy in an Unholy World

### *“The Beauty of Holiness”*

**Psalm 29:2** “Worship the Lord in the beauty of holiness.” (NKJV)

There is a phrase in Scripture that occurs again and again and again that always intrigues me. One of the places where we find this phrase is in **Psalm 29**, the **2<sup>nd</sup> verse**, where the psalmist exhorts us: *“Worship the Lord in the beauty of holiness”* (NKJV).

**The beauty of holiness!** That’s the phrase that arouses my curiosity. Now let’s just be perfectly honest with one another this morning. How many of us would ever even think of associating **beauty** with **holiness**?

Listen, I grew up in a “holiness” church. Our family attended and were members of the **Forest Hills Pilgrim Holiness Church**. It’s where I came to know Jesus as my Savior and Lord. I owe a deep, deep debt of gratitude to the members and ministries of that church.

But when I think of **holiness** and how it was preached, presented and lived in the life of that congregation there are many words that come to my mind but **beautiful** is not one of them. The “holy” people I knew never smiled very much. They were grim and gloomy and harsh (and sometimes just downright sour!) and seemed to frown on anything that was fun or pleasurable.

It was like they were soaked in embalming fluid. They never looked like they enjoyed anything in life. And if, perchance, they did find something they did enjoy...they always felt guilty about it.

I remember a woman who came to see me one day when I was serving as the pastor of the **Free Methodist Church in Bedford, Indiana**. She had grown up in one of these very conservative, legalistic, holiness churches that had this long list of rules and regulations and laws and do’s and don’ts (well, mostly, don’ts!).

Here’s what she said to me. Here was the “problem” that brought her

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to me to seek my pastoral counsel. She said, *“Pastor Mark, I’m just so glad I have found the Free Methodist Church. I love it here. I have learned so much about Scripture and about really living the Christian life. But, I feel so guilty. I’m enjoying my Christianity so much that I just know something must be wrong. It has to be harder than this, doesn’t it?”*

That’s the concept a lot of people have about holiness—that it is something grim and rigorous and hard and painful and bleak.

A newspaper editor wrote this little editorial several years ago. Perhaps you’ve seen it. He writes:

**In church last Sunday I noted a small child who was turning around smiling at everyone. He wasn’t gurgling, spitting, humming, tearing the hymnbooks apart, or rummaging through his mother’s purse. He was just smiling.**

**Suddenly his mother jerked him around, and in a stage whisper that everyone could hear, said, “Stop grinning. You’re in church.” With that she gave him a slap on the hind side, and as the tears rolled down his cheeks, she added, “That’s better,” and returned to her prayers.**

The editor goes on to comment, *“If you can’t grin in church, where can you be happy?”* But, you see, many of us have a distorted view of holiness. It’s a heavy word for a lot of us. It’s a fearful word. It’s an old fashioned word. It drudges up all kinds of negative and unpleasant images.

We think of people who we don’t want to be like—people who claimed to be holy but were harsh, people who claimed to be Spirit-filled but were stern and strict and merciless, people who claimed to be sanctified but in reality were just sanctimonious.

And many of us have just completely dismissed this word “holy” from our personal vocabularies. We have deleted it from the hard-drive memory of our minds. It doesn’t even compute with us. We don’t talk about it. We don’t think about it. We don’t pray about it. We don’t want it. We don’t desire it. Or, if we do, we just feel that it is

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completely beyond our reach, our hope, the realm of possibility.

And, yet, again and again and again and again the Bible talks about the *“beauty of holiness.”* If you think *holiness* is an unattractive, unsightly, distasteful thing then let me just remind you that one of God’s attributes, one of His characteristics, one of His traits is holiness.

**Isaiah 6:3** – *“Holy, holy, holy is the Lord Almighty; the whole earth is full of his glory”* (NIV). Three times in one chapter the psalmist writes of God, *“He is holy”* (Psalm 99). One of the names of Jesus is *“the Holy One of God”* (Mark 1:24 NIV).

If you know Jesus, if you truly know God, you know that He is anything but harsh or grim or merciless or ugly. He’s the *Lily of the Valley*; He’s the *Bright and Morning Star*; He’s the *Fairest of Ten Thousand*; He’s the *Light of the Word*. *“In him there is no darkness at all”* (1<sup>st</sup> John 1:5 NIV). He is *“full of grace and truth”* (John 1:14 NIV).

I love it when we sing that little chorus in worship:

**O Lord, You’re beautiful  
Your face is all I seek.  
For when Your eyes are on this child,  
Your grace abounds to me.**

Jesus is holy. God is holy. Holiness is a beautiful thing. It is not harsh or stale or bleak or outdated. It is not something to fear or dread or avoid. It is a beautiful thing! And when you see it embodied in the life of a man or a woman it will take your breath away.

**Charles Spurgeon**, the *Prince of Preachers*, one put it like this: *“The serene, silent beauty of a holy life is the most powerful influence in the world, next to the might of the Spirit of God.”*

And so that’s what we’re going to be talking about and focusing upon over the course of these next several Sundays – the **Beauty of Holiness**. God calls us to live holy lives. Listen to what He says in **1<sup>st</sup> Peter 1:16**. *“Be holy, because I am holy”* (NIV).

I’m entitling this series of sermons: **“Swimming Against The Tide”** or **“Being Holy in an Unholy World.”** We live in the midst of a culture that is not user-friendly to a Christian believer—to a man or a woman who wants to live a holy.

Now, frankly, that is not anything new. Back when Jesus lived and walked upon the face of this earth, He said, *“Wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction, and many enter through it. But small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it”* (Matthew 7:13-14 NIV).

If you’re going to respond to the call of Jesus and live a holy life then, listen, you’re going to have to swim against the tide. You’re going to have to be counter-culture. You’re going to have to take the narrow road through life that’s not all that frequently traveled by most people. But it is the way of blessing and the way of life and a thing of exquisite beauty.

And so I want to encourage you to pursue holiness because the Bible says, *“Without holiness (without swimming against the tide, without walking the narrow way, without being different from the world, standing apart) no one will see the Lord”* (Hebrews 12:14 NIV).

Therefore, I have a very simple question to ask you this morning. ***What kind of a Christian are you?***

Not long ago I was talking to a man about Jesus and I had the opportunity to ask him, *“Are you a Christian?”* He looked at me with me for just a moment and then kind of looked away and said, *“Well, I’m a member of a church and I believe in Jesus.”* But then he added, *“To be honest with you, I’m not really much of a Christian.”*

As he talked and then later on as I observed how he lived his life, I could see that his self-criticism was pretty accurate. I mean he wasn’t much of a Christian, if he was a Christian at all!

You may remember that in the twilight of his public ministry, the famous Pentecostal preacher and healer, **Oral Roberts**, left the denomination

with which he had been affiliated all of his life, the **Pentecostal Holiness Church**, and joined the **United Methodist Church**. When someone asked him, *“Why in the world would you do that? Are you turning your back on the Charismatic Movement?”*

He said, *“No, no, not at all. I just believe that God wants to bring revival to America and there is no greater mission field in America today than the United Methodist Church.”*

Now, being a Methodist, that hurts a little bit. But it’s true. Just because a person is a member of a church *doesn’t mean* that there much of a Christian. Those two words aren’t synonymous. And so I ask you this morning: ***What kind of a Christian are you?***

On the pages of the New Testament you find several different kinds of Christians. They can be divided, really, into two groups; namely, those who have power in their lives for Jesus and those who do not. Let me see if I can show you what I mean.

In the book of **John** we are introduced to a man who is usually identified by these words—the man *“who at first came to Jesus by night”* (John 19:39 NKJV). It’s referring, of course, to **Nicodemus**.

Nicodemus was a man of high standing in the community. He was a religious leader, a Pharisee. He was a member of the most powerful and influential board in all of Jerusalem, the Sanhedrin. He was a ruler, a judge. But his heart was drawn to Jesus.

And so one night when it is dark and no one can see him, he slips through the shadows and knocks at the door where Jesus is staying. And they talk, heart to heart, soul to soul, spirit to spirit. You may remember that it was in the midst of this midnight conversation that Jesus said to Nicodemus those eternal words:

- **“For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life”** (John 3:16 NIV)

- **“You must be born again”** (John 3:7 NIV).

- **“Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit”** (John 3:6 NIV).

*Did Nicodemus believe Jesus that night? Did he place faith in Him? All the evidence points to “yes.” In fact, he said, “Rabbi, we know you are a teacher who has come from God. For no one could perform the miraculous signs you are doing if God were not with him”* (John 3:2 NIV).

Not only did he *believe* Him, he *loved* him. After Christ is crucified, it is Nicodemus who brings a box of very precious and expensive spices to anoint the body of our Lord. Oh, he loved Him! No question about that.

But let me remind you of what kind of Christian Nicodemus was. He was a **Fearful** Christian. Not only did he first come to Jesus under the cloak of darkness, in secrecy, making sure no one else knew—he also lived out his life and his relationship with Jesus in that way.

In **John 7** we read of how there was a special meeting one night by the religious leaders in Jerusalem and there was one thing on the agenda. They had gathered to determine how to get rid of Jesus. And Nicodemus is there. He is a member of the board, a member of the committee, and he sits and listens as the scribes and the Pharisees discuss how to get rid of Jesus.

They talk about using force, killing Him, his friend, Jesus. *So what did Nicodemus do? What would you have done?* You would think, wouldn’t you, that Nicodemus would have stood up for his friend, would have tried to somehow halt this runaway jury.

You would think, wouldn’t you, that Nicodemus would have stood up and said something like this: ***“Listen, I’ve met this Man. I spent a whole evening with Him, questioning Him, talking with Him, listening to Him. I’m convinced He is our promised Messiah and I’ve decided to accept Him as such.”***

*Did he say that?* No. That would have aroused a storm of criticism and controversy. He believed it but he was afraid to say it. But his heart is

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about to burst so he has to say something. He puts in a good word for Jesus. He says, **“Does our law condemn a man without first hearing him to find out what he is doing?”** (John 7:51 NIV). Yeah, it’s abstract and vague, but it’s something.

However, when one of his peers stands up and points a finger at him and says, **“Are you from Galilee, too?”** (John 7:52 NIV). *Are you one of them?* Nicodemus just melts in fear, shrinks away, and never says another word.

He loved Jesus without doubt. He believed in Him, but he had no power for Jesus because of his timidity.

*Is that the kind of Christian you are?* You have come to Him, you have believed in Him, you have been saved by Him, you love Him, but you just shrink back from speaking out for Him when the opportunity presents itself. Powerless for Jesus!

Think of all of the things Nicodemus could have said and could have done. It might have made a real difference in Jerusalem. But we will never know because he was a powerless Christian.

There’s another kind of powerless Christian that is pictured in the book of **John**. The reason is so different but the effect is just the same. In the **11<sup>th</sup> chapter** of **John**, we find the story of **Lazarus**. He, too, was a friend of Jesus and a follower, but one day he became deathly ill and died and they buried him in a tomb.

His sisters, **Mary** and **Martha**, send for Jesus and Jesus comes. In the midst of all of the weeping and the wailing and the mourning, they go to the gravesite where the body of **Lazarus** has been buried and speaks words of life to this dead man. He says, **“Lazarus, come forth”** (John 11:43 NKJV).

Now catch this. The Scripture says, **“He who had died came out bound hand and foot with graveclothes, and his face was wrapped**

**with a cloth. Jesus said to them, ‘Loose him, and let him go’”** (John 11:44 NKJV).

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He is alive but his hands and his feet are bound. He is incapacitated. He can’t walk. He can’t run. He can’t jump. He can’t move his hands in any kind of constructive way. He can’t do anything. He is powerless.

I have met Christians who are like that. The Master has spoken and they have responded to His voice. But they are so tied up with the graveclothes of the old life, the old way, that they are spiritually incapacitated and powerless to make much of a difference for Jesus.

*Is that the kind of Christian you are—a **Powerless** Christian?* You may be thinking, **“Well, what do you mean by being bound up by the old life?”** I simply mean this: It may be some harmful habit from the old life that you just haven’t let go and it’s just draining every ounce of spiritual energy that you have. It may be some old friendship you have carried into your new life that’s damaging and destructive and just keeps pulling you back spiritually.

It may be some kind of bitterness or hurt or sorrow that you just haven’t been willing to release to the Lord. There are all kinds of things that can so bind us up spiritually that even when we’ve been called to life by the voice of Jesus and we come forth from the spiritual grave we find ourselves helpless and powerless and unable to hardly do anything for Him.

*Is that the kind of Christian you are? Is that the reason why you have so little power with God...and for God?*

Well, I’m happy to tell you that there is another kind of Christian found in the New Testament—a completely different kind of Christian than the **Fearful** Christian or the **Powerless** Christian. It is the ideal, according to Jesus, of what a Christian ought to be.

*Have you ever wondered, “Well, what is it that Jesus really wants from my life? What is it He expects from me, as a Christian?”* I believe the answer to both of those questions are found in some words Jesus spoke to the people of His day and they’re recorded for us in the **7<sup>th</sup> chapter** of

## the Gospel of John.

Here is what Jesus said, *“If anyone thirsts, let him come to me and*

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*drink. He who believes in me, as the Scripture has said, out of his heart will flow rivers of living water”* (John 7:37-38 NKJV).

I believe Jesus is talking here about the **Spirit-Filled** Christian—that man or woman who is filled with the Spirit of God, who is filled with life and love and joy and peace and patience and kindness and goodness and faithfulness and gentleness and self-control...and who just lifts up and encourages and refreshes and brings life to anyone and everyone around them.

Notice what Jesus says. It is very important that you catch this and understand. He says, *“Out of his heart will flow rivers of living water.”* The stream must flow in but it must also flow out. There must be an open channel upward...and a clear channel inward...but the objective is that there might be an unhindered flow outward...so it can water and bring life to the parched earth.

But, you see, before it can **flow out** it must **fill up**. And, really, the **outflow** is nothing more than an **overflow**. There must be a flooding inside before there can be a flowing out. You see, it is only through the overflow of the fullness of God within our lives that we can ever hope or expect to bring life and encouragement and enrichment to others.

I heard about a man who lived in England who was praying for an outpouring of God’s Spirit upon his church and here is how he prayed. He said, *“O, Lord, we can’t hold much, but we can overflow lots!”* That’s exactly what Jesus is talking about here. *“Out of his heart will flow rivers of living water.”*

That’s the kind of Christian I want to be. *Isn’t that the kind of Christian you want to be?* I want to be a **Balcony Person** not a **Basement Person**. I want to encourage people, refresh them, lift them up, give them hope, show them the way instead of being one of those kinds of persons who just drag other people down, discourage them, suck the life out of them.

*How do you do that? How do you become Spirit-Filled Christian?*

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Notice where Jesus begins—it begins with **thirst** and **belief**. *“If anyone thirsts, let him come to me and drink. He who believes in me, as the Scripture has said, out of his heart will flow rivers of living water.”*

*Are you really thirsty to be filled with God’s Spirit? Are you just sick and tired of being a Fearful, Powerless, Bound-up Christian? Do you really believe that God is “able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work with us, and in Christ Jesus?”*

*Do you really believe that He’s not just playing games with you when He says, “Be holy, because I am holy?”*

If so, let me encourage you to pray a simple little four-part prayer this morning.

**Save Me!** Now I know what some of you are probably thinking. You are saying to yourself, *“But, Pastor Mark, I’ve already prayed that prayer. I’ve asked Jesus to save me. I’ve asked Him to come into my heart as Savior.”*

This prayer is more than just a prayer for lost sinners. It’s a prayer for believers. It’s a prayer for Christians. It’s a prayer we ought always pray. It is a prayer of total dependence upon God. It’s a prayer that says, *“God, I can’t save myself. I can’t improve my life in my own power. I’ve tried. It doesn’t work when I depend upon my own strength, my own wisdom, my own righteousness.”*

*“God, save me from my sins, save me from myself, save me from my own sense of spiritual pride and self-sufficiency, save me from the situations I’m facing in life. Save me because I just cannot make it without you.”*

Now here’s the second part of the prayer I want you to pray this morning.

I'll work for You.

**Cleanse Me!** You may remember that when Jesus rode into Jerusalem triumphantly that the first thing He did was go to the Temple and cleanse it. He overturned the tables of the money changers, drove out all who

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buying and selling and abusing others, and said, "***My house will be called a house of prayer***" (Matthew 21:13 NIV), but you have allowed it become a den for robbers and thieves.

Just ask yourself this morning: *If Jesus came into the temple of life, what tables would He overturn? What elements of my life would He want to drive out? In what areas of my life have I allowed evil and corruption to exist to the point that it cuts against the grain of everything He has called me to be?*

We need to pray, "***God, cleanse me. Cleanse my life like You cleansed the Temple. Drive out everything that is not pleasing to You.***"

Now here is the third part of the prayer that I encourage you to pray today.

**Fill Me!** "***God, fill me with Your Spirit. In all of those areas where You have cleansed me from evil and unholy thoughts and actions, fill me with Your Spirit—the Spirit of love, the Spirit of power, the Spirit of grace.***"

**Use Me!** "***God, I can't hold much of your Spirit, but I can overflow lots.***"

***“God, don't let my Christianity be defined just by what I believe in my head, how many verses I've memorized, how many times I've gone to church, how eloquently I can pray, but let my Christianity be defined by how I live my life, by how it influences others.”***

Jesus, use me. Oh Lord, don't refuse me  
For surely there's a work that I can do.  
Even though it makes me humble,  
Lord, help my will to crumble  
And though the cost be great

Jesus says, "***If anyone thirsts, let him come to me and drink. He who believes in me, as the Scripture has said, out of his heart will flow rivers of living water.***"