

SWIMMING AGAINST THE TIDE

Being Holy in an Unholy World

“Holiness: Don’t Take It Personally!”

Matthew 18:1-14

It’s not what you take when you leave this world behind you, it’s what you leave behind you when you go. Can you think of a more appropriate truth for us to focus upon this Memorial Day Sunday than this matter of leaving a lasting legacy?

The fact of the matter is we don’t take anything with us when we leave this world behind other than the raw essence of who we are. The Old Testament character **Job** nailed it perfectly when he said, ***“Naked came I out of my mother’s womb, and naked shall I return thither”*** (Job 1:21 King James Version).

We don’t take anything with us when we die. You’ll not see a U-Haul trailer hitched to a hearse. But we do leave something behind. Yes, we leave all of our material goods here on earth when we die—our stuff, our things, our possessions.

Someone else is going to live in your home. Someone else is going to drive your car. Someone else is going to use your tools. Someone else is going to spend all that money you leave. Someone else is going to hold your remote control.

Someone else is going to enjoy all of your stuff...but, more than all of that, there is something far more valuable you’re going to leave behind you—your influence, your legacy, your works, your heritage, the thumbprint of your life and your values and your beliefs.

The Bible says, ***“Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord...for their deeds will follow them”*** (Revelation 14:13 New International Version). When we die, we are going to leave behind some kind of legacy. Our deeds will follow us. And so what better time than on this Memorial Sunday to think about the kind of legacy we’re going to leave to our family, our friends, our church, our community, our world?

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Now I was tempted again this Sunday, since it is a holiday Sunday, to stray away from this series of sermons on holiness and preach about something else—something that pertains particularly to Memorial Day. And then I remembered some words that were once spoken by **Saint Francis of Assisi**, one of the most godly men who ever lived.

He said one time, ***“Sanctify yourself and you will sanctify society,”*** and I was reminded that holiness is never a personal and private matter—it will affect and influence everyone and everything around us.

John Wesley once wrote, ***“There is no religion but social religion, no holiness but social holiness.”*** Or, in other words, holiness will always exhibit itself in and through our relationships in life—how we interact with and relate to the people around us. There is no holiness but social holiness.

I hear people talk from time to time about “personal holiness.” Now I know what they mean, but if you want to get real technical that is an oxymoron. There is no such thing as “personal” holiness—something that is private and personal and individual. Holiness always exists and displays itself in the midst of community.

You will not find a more powerful or persuasive proponent of holiness in all of history than John Wesley. And, yet, he reminds us, ***“There is no religion but social religion, no holiness but social holiness.”*** Holiness is displayed by the way we treat other people.

And, so, that’s what I want to talk about this morning—our relationships. How we view and interact with and relate to the people around us. If we want to leave a lasting legacy that will inspire our loved ones and help turn their hearts toward God and make this world a better place than we found it then it all begins with this thing called holiness. ***“Without holiness,”*** says the Word of God, ***“no one will see the Lord”*** (Hebrews 12:10 New International Version).

So please take your Bibles and turn to the gospel of **Matthew**, the **18th chapter**, and we’re going to begin reading with that very **1st verse**.

At that time the disciples came to Jesus and asked, “Who is the

greatest in the kingdom of heaven?”

He called a little child and had him stand among them. And he said: “I tell you the truth, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Therefore, whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. And whoever welcomes a little child like this in my name welcomes me.”

“But if anyone causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him to have a large millstone hung around his neck and to be drowned in the depths of the sea. Woe to the world because of the things that cause people to sin!”

“Such things must come but woe to the man through whom they come! If your hand or your foot causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to enter life maimed or crippled than to have two hands or two feet and be thrown into eternal fire.”

“And if your eye causes you to sin, gouge it out and throw it away. It is better for you to enter life with one eye than to have two eyes and be thrown into the fire of hell.”

“See that you do not look down on one of these little ones. For I tell you that their angels in heaven always see the face of my Father in heaven.”

“What do you think? If a man owns a hundred sheep, and one of them wanders away, will he not leave the ninety-nine on the hills and go to look for the one that wandered off?”

“And if he finds it, I tell you the truth, he is happier about that one sheep than about the ninety-nine that did not wander off. In the same way your Father in heaven is not willing that any of these little ones should be lost.” (Matthew 18:1-14 New International Version)

There’s an old hymn that goes something like this:

**Lord let me from day to day
In such a self-forgetful way
That even when I kneel to pray
My prayer will be for others.**

**Others, Lord, yes others
Let this my motto be
Let me live for others, Lord,
That I may live like Thee.**

That hymn captures the very spirit of what Jesus is saying here in this passage from Matthew. **If you have a heart for God then you’ll have a heart for people.** Let me just quote John Wesley one more time. *“There is no holiness but social holiness”* – a holiness that influences and impacts how I view and treat and relate to other people!

When I was a kid there was an old gospel song we used to sing from time to time entitled *“On The Jericho Road.”* Are you familiar with it? The chorus goes something like this:

**On the Jericho Road
There’s room for just two.
No more and no less--
Just Jesus and you.**

But wait a minute! It’s not just *“Jesus and me.”* The Lord always brings into the picture this other person whom He refers to as our *“neighbor.”*

You remember, when Jesus was asked one time, *“Which is the greatest commandment in the Law?”* He answered, *“‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’ This is the first and greatest commandment.”* But He didn’t stop there. He went on to say, *“And the second is like it; ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments”* (Matthew 22:37-40 New International Version).

It’s not just a matter of *“Jesus and me.”* Holiness is more than just what you do in private—your thought life, your devotional life, your prayer life—it is also a matter of what you do in public—how you relate to other people.

And so, as Jesus begins to talk about really living a holy life, being godly, leaving a lasting legacy, He talks about how we view and treat

and relate with other people. Basically, He says at least 3 things to us.

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First, He says, “We need to recognize how important other people are.” Look at what He says in verse 5. *“Whoever welcomes a little child like this in my name welcomes me.”*

Now you will remember that the disciples didn’t think children were very important. In fact, on one occasion when people were bringing their little children to Jesus for Him to place His hands on them and pray for them and bless them, His disciples got all bent out of shape and shooed them away.

“Can’t you see the Master’s busy? He doesn’t have time for kids. He doesn’t have time for this. He has places to go and people to see and things to do and miracles to perform. Don’t bother Him with trivial things like this. They’re just kids. He doesn’t have time for kids!”

And then Jesus got bent out of shape. He said to His disciples, *“Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these”* (Matthew 19:14 New International Version).

And He took time and placed His hands on them and prayed for them and blessed them. These kids weren’t very important in the disciple’s eyes but they were incredibly important in Jesus’ eyes. And here is what I think He is saying to us in this passage of Scripture. **Every human being—no matter how small or unimportant or insignificant they may appear in the eyes of the world—is extremely important God.**

In fact, He says, *“Whoever welcomes a little child like this in my name welcomes me.”*

One of the canonized saints of the Roman Catholic Church is a man who is known as **Saint Martin of Tours**. In fact, he was the first non-martyr to be officially declared a saint by the Roman Catholic Church. Martin Luther, by the way, was named after Saint Martin of Tours.

He was a very humble man who championed the cause of the poor and

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the disenfranchised and who was known for his habit of fasting. Often-times he would fast for days and weeks at a time.

There’s a famous legend about Saint Martin of Tours. Before he ever became a monk, he was a soldier in the Roman army. One cold, snowy, winter day as he and his troops were entering a city a beggar stopped him and asked for some money to buy food.

Martin didn’t have any money; but the beggar was cold, his lips were blue, and he was shivering from head to toe. So this is what Martin did. He took off his coat—it was one of those long, heavy, full-lengthened soldier’s coats—cut it in two with his sword and handed half of it to this beggar.

That night Martin had a dream. In this dream, he was transported to heaven and he saw the golden streets and the pearly gates and the angels and in the midst of all of the angels was Jesus. And Jesus was wearing a half of a Roman soldier’s coat.

One of the angels said to Jesus, *“Master, why are you wearing that old battered soldier’s coat this cut in half? Who gave it to you?”*

And Jesus replied, *“My servant Martin gave it to me and I wear it with pride.”*

Jesus said one time, *“Inasmuch as you did it to one of the least of these My brethren, you did it to Me”* (Matthew 25:40 New King James Version). *Do you remember what He was talking about?* Feeding the hungry; welcoming the stranger; clothing the needy; ministering to the sick and to those in prison.

Now here’s my point. When it comes to this matter of holiness, we need to be reminded again and again and again that people are extremely important in the eyes of God and that every time we see another human being it is an opportunity to really practice holiness.

In fact, when Jesus says here, *“Whoever welcomes a little child,”* or as

the *King James Version* renders it, “*Whoever receives one little child,*” the Greek word that is used there that is translated “*welcomes*” or

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“*receives*” means quite literally to “*take someone in*” like a host who honors a guest in his or her own home.

Now if you have an honored guest visiting in your home, what do you do? You go out of your way to serve them, to help them, to make them feel comfortable. You put clean sheets on the bed. You fix a meal for them. You ask them, “Are you thirsty? Can I get you something to drink?” When you turn the television on, you say, “What do you want to watch?”

When you welcome someone into your home, you are agreeing in essence to serve them. And Jesus says, “*This is the way we should treat everyone we meet.*” Our attitude should be, “*What can I do for you? How can I serve you?*” This is the holiest attitude you can have—the attitude of serving others.

That’s who Jesus was. He said, “*The Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many*” (Matthew 20:28 New International Version). When God says to us, “*Be holy, because I am holy*” (1st Peter 1:16 New International Version), one of the things He is talking about is in developing the attitude of a servant.

One of the most crucial steps in this whole matter of holiness is in recognizing the importance of serving others. So Jesus says, **first, we need to recognize how important other people are.**

Second, He says, “We Need To Recognize The Importance Of The Example That We Set. Look at verse 6. “*If anyone causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him to have a large millstone hung around his neck and to be drowned in the depths of the sea.*”

The great Bible scholar **William Barclay** says something I had never thought of before. In writing about this specific text, he says, “*No man sins uninvited.*” Now think about that for just a moment.

Every temptation to sin comes in the form of invitation and most often there is someone on the other side of that invitation. In the Garden of

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Eden it was the serpent Satan who tempted Adam and Eve to taste of the forbidden fruit. For Joseph it was Potiphar’s wife who had eyes for him, found him attractive, and said, “*Come to bed with me.*” For Samson, it was Delilah.

Now that doesn’t resolve us of responsibility and give us the right to say to others, “*You’re the one who caused me to sin. It’s your fault.*” Each one of us is accountable to God. The Bible says in **Romans 14:12**, “*Each of us will give an account of himself to God*” (New International Version).

But here is what Jesus is saying. Here is His point. Every time we gossip, we’re not only committing a despicable sin, but we’re also dragging someone else down into this awful pit with us. Every time we commit a sexual sin, we’re not only committing a despicable sin, but we’re also dragging someone else down into this awful pit with us.

Every time we allow money to be our god, every time we allow the slimy arms of materialism to wrap around us and seduce us, we’re not only committing a despicable sin, but we’re also dragging someone else (usually our families, our children) down into this awful pit with us.

*Do you catch what Jesus is saying? **Man is a creature that is led more by patterns than by precepts.** Albert Schweitzer* one put it like this: “*Example is not the main thing in influencing others, it’s the only thing.*”

And so when you begin to think about personal holiness just remember that it is anything and everything but personal. Our lives are intimately linked together with other people and we need to recognize the importance of the example that we set.

You see, when it comes to this matter of holiness, it’s not just being good for our own sake and satisfaction, it is also about being good so that we can inspire others to be good. Just a your behavior can influence others to stumble, your behavior can also influence others to act holy. When they see you serving, it will inspire them to serve.

When they see you being gracious, it will inspire them to be gracious. When they see you living a victorious spiritual life, it will inspire to know

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that they, too, can live a victorious spiritual life through the power and presence of the Holy Spirit of God.

So recognize the importance of your example. Remember that you are going to leave a legacy of either good or evil. There are people who are watching you, and your behavior influences them more than you can even imagine.

When you sin, it leads them to sin. But when you are holy, it leads them to hunger for and thirst after and pursue holiness.

Now here's one other thing Jesus says to us in this passage.

Third, He says, "We Need To Recognize The Importance Of Loving People. Look at verses 12 through 14.

If a man owns a hundred sheep, and one of them wanders away, will he not leave the ninety-nine on the hills and go to look for the one that wandered off? And if he finds it, I tell you the truth, he is happier about that one sheep than about the ninety-nine that did not wander off. In the same way your Father in heaven is not willing that any of these little ones should be lost.

Now usually when we hear this parable we think of just how much God loves us. He loves me. I'm important in His sight. He knows my name. The hairs on my head are numbered...He knows me so intimately.

Now that is true! God does love you very much. But Jesus is really teaching another lesson here. Notice how this illustration begins. He says in **verse 10, "See that you do not look down on one of these little ones. For I tell you that their angels in heaven always see the face of my Father in heaven."**

We should never look down on anyone, because everyone matters to God. I have to remind myself of that often. I have to remind myself

of the fact that God loves the people who get on my nerves. God loves that woman who gets in front of me at the Express Aisle at Kroger's who has a whole basket full of groceries when it clearly says on the sign "**10 Items or Less.**"

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God loves that person who sits and sits and sits at that stoplight and doesn't remember that you can turn right on red at most intersections.

God loves that person who talks on the cell phone in the restaurant when you're trying to have a nice quiet dinner. God loves that person who carried a cigarette with them to the salad bar. God loves that person who stands too close to you when they talk.

God loves that person who bores you over and over again with those same old stories. God loves that person who is always the hero in every story they tell you, who always has to be the center of attention, who is always the loudest.

If you haven't figured it out yet then I have to confess to you that sometimes I can be very intolerant. Well, Jesus reminds me here that is wrong. There is not room in the Kingdom of God for condescension on any level. When we look down our nose at other people, we make God unhappy because we are looking down our nose at someone He loves supremely. We're looking down our nose at someone for whom Christ died.

Holiness is not just a matter of Jesus and me! I'm a part of a family and it involves how I view and interact with and relate to the other people around me. And so when you get into those situations in which someone begins to rub you the wrong way...let it be an occasion for you to really be holy—to pray for them, to serve them, to lead by example, and to love them even as Jesus loves them.

Jesus said, "***A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. All men will know that you are my disciples if you love one another***" (John 13:34-35 New International Version).

