

## ***The Spirit of Holiness***

### **Let's pray...**

If you are just joining us, we are in the midst of a summer series on the person, passions and work of the Holy Spirit – with the goal of not just more **information**; that we'd simply **know more** about the person and work of the Holy Spirit – but that we would **live more in** the Spirit and **by the Spirit**.

As the apostle Paul exhorts us in **Galatians 5:16** – "*So I say, **walk** by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the sinful nature.*" And later in the same **chapter** - **Galatians 5:25** - "*Since we live by the Spirit, let us **keep in step with** the Spirit.*"

That's where I want us to end up today and next Sunday, but that's not where we will begin.

I want to begin this morning by inviting us to a text of scripture that some of us may know (we actually referenced this text in our introduction to this summer study – **Ezekiel 36:25f.**

(If you have a bible, turn with me there.)

In truth, Ezekiel 36 is one of the most significant prophecies in the OT about the **New Covenant** – which God would ultimately bring about through the death and resurrection of Jesus and the gift of the Holy Spirit. And it's a beautiful passage and promise – where God speaks of a day when He would cleanse his people of their idolatries

and impurities, and put a new heart and a new spirit in them – His Spirit in them... in us (His New Covenant people)...

But I want to step back for a moment and help us grasp the **reason** why the New Covenant was needed.

And the simple explanation and hard reality, that both Ezekiel and Jeremiah testify to, is that Israel, God's covenant people, had **failed** to keep God's covenant. They had turned from worshipping and trusting God alone... and living as His people... And in this, they had failed to represent His name among the nations – to reflect His holiness.

In fact, we're told in **Ezekiel 36:20** that, *"wherever they went among the nations they profaned [God's] holy name"...*

What a **sobering** statement. What a sad description of Israel's history and legacy. Wherever they went, they profaned God's holy name. Their lives – and their life together as a people – did not reflect and reveal the beauty of God's holiness – God's good and beautiful character and ways. Just the opposite – they dishonored God's name.

And **because of this**, because God's people did not honor God as a nation, God, in grace, promised to act – **for the sake of HIS name**.

That's what God says. **Ezekiel 36:23** – *"I will show the holiness of my great name, which has been profaned among the nations, the*

*name you have profaned among them. Then the nations will know that I am the LORD, declares the Sovereign LORD, **when I am proved holy through you before their eyes.**"*

Do you hear what God says? Those last words are hugely significant. He says, "*Then the nations will know that I am the LORD... **when I am proved holy through you before their eyes.**"*

This is how God explained His reasoning for the New Covenant – for the coming of Christ and the Spirit: that God, in grace, would make for Himself a new people **in whom and through whom** His holiness – God's beautiful character and ways – would be real and alive and **made known...** That **God's** holiness would be on display in and through His people – in and through **us**. That others – **Israel's neighbors, our neighbors** – would know and glorify God because of how His holiness is revealed in and through you... and me... and our life as a community.

And so because of this, because Israel failed to keep God's covenant and bear His holy name among the nations, God promised:

**(Ezekiel 36:24f)**

*For I will take you out of the nations; I will gather you from all the countries and bring you back into your own land. I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you will be clean; **I will cleanse you** from all your impurities and from all your idols. **I will give you a new heart** and put **a new spirit** in you; I will **remove** from you your heart of stone and **give** you a heart of flesh. And I will **put my Spirit** in you and move you to **follow my decrees** and be careful **to keep my***

***laws.*** *Then you will live in the land I gave your ancestors; you will be my people, and I will be your God."*

What a promise... What a beautiful, gracious promise...

We're starting here this morning because this passage reveals one of the **central** works of the Spirit – that we often somehow miss... That we don't spend enough time thinking and talking about.

That ***the Spirit comes to make us holy.***

***To sanctify us – to make us holy like our God.***

Which should be no surprise to us – since the Spirit, throughout the New Testament, is referred to nearly **100 times** as the **HOLY** Spirit.

Somehow that has been lost on many Christians. I know it was lost on me for many years.

It's stunning and humbling for me to realize that, a number of years ago, I took my first church through a whole summer on the person and work of the Spirit – ***and we hardly talked about this.***

We talked about the Spirit as God's presence with us and in us. We talked how the Spirit ministers to us on behalf of Jesus. We talked about the empowering of the Spirit for mission and witness. We talked about the **gifts** of the Spirit (at length) – about the gift of prophecy and tongues, the gift of mercy and leadership.

*But we didn't spend much time talking about the Spirit's work in making us holy.*

And I wonder how many of **our** conversations this summer – about the Holy Spirit – have been similar – similarly devoid of the Spirit's work in making us holy...?

**And yet**, more than anything else, the Spirit is referred to, throughout the NT, as the **Holy** Spirit. Not the *Happy* Spirit. Not the *Missional* Spirit. Not the *Prophetic* Spirit. Not the *Surprising* Spirit. But the **Holy** Spirit.

At one point, in **Romans 1:3**, Paul even refers to the Spirit explicitly as "**the Spirit of Holiness**." The Spirit who comes to bring the beauty and life-giving holiness of God to bear in our lives and our life together – as God's New Covenant people today.

**Let me say that again** (cause this is at the heart of what we need to grasp and celebrate today): *The Spirit comes to bring **the beauty and life-giving holiness of God** to bear in our lives and life together.*

I want to dig deep today into this truth and reality: of *the **beauty and life-giving holiness** of God.*

I use these words intentionally because it seems like the idea and call of holiness is often viewed these days as something **negative**, or **diminishing**; as some vestige of **legalistic religion**; or simply **boring** or downright **undesirable**.

Years ago, J.I. Packer, wrote, "**The word 'holiness' suggests** to modern people something pale, anemic, withdrawn, negative and

passive. *That shows how little modern people know about it!*

Scriptural holiness is in fact the most positive, potent and often passionate quality of life that is ever seen."

Tim Chester, in a book I'm personally reading right now, entitled You Can Change, says – "One of our problems is that we think of holiness as giving up things that we enjoy out of a vague sense of obligation. But [he goes on to say] I'm convinced that holiness is always good new."

As Packer says, "[True] holiness is the most positive, potent and often passionate quality of life that is ever seen."

These two wise Christians affirm what scripture declares again and again – **the beauty of holiness**.

**So, what is holiness? What does it mean to be holy?** If essential to the Spirit's work is bringing the beauty and life-giving holiness of God to bear in our lives – What is Holiness? What does it mean to be holy?

Well, it's worth acknowledging right at the start that holiness is, above all, what God is. **Like nothing or no one else, God is Holy**. In truth, to say that God is Holy is to say just that - that God is like **nothing and no one else**. He is Holy **Other** – He is *set apart*. The Hebrew and Greek words for 'holy' literally mean – "set apart".

Which many of us know. But, let's be honest, this idea isn't that awe-inspiring. "**God is set apart.**" There is nothing about that that stirs the heart and makes us cry out: **Hallelujah!**

Not until we see and know **how** He is set apart...

We need to probe deeper into God's holiness to see and feel the beauty of it. Because what sets God apart is what makes holiness – and the God who is Holy – so beautiful.

So, first of all, to say that God is Holy is to say that He is **set apart** *from all that is evil*. To say that God is holy is to say that in Him is the **utter absence of all** that is cruel, impure, unloving, unjust, selfish, deceptive, oppressive, corrupt, malevolent, perverse, evil, and everything like it. To say that God is holy is to say that in Him is the **utter absence** of **all** these things. There is nothing cruel about Him. There is nothing unjust, vindictive, or suspect about Him. In Him there is no evil. *He is **set apart** from all these things.*

This is essential to God's Holiness. This is essential to what sets God apart from everyone and everything else...

And this alone is reason to worship Him. To praise God because He is Holy...

But that's not all.

Because God's holiness means not only this – not only that in Him is the **total absence** of all that is evil and unfaithful and suspect,

but that in Him is the **utter fullness of all** that is good and beautiful and just and pure and righteous. God is not only *not in any way* evil, or cruel or selfish, but He is **utterly** and **entirely** good, faithful, loving, just, trustworthy, compassionate, and on and on and on.

And each of these are not static or abstract qualities, they are relational realities – they describe who God is and, consequently, how He is toward us... and all.

This is what the Biblical authors mean when they say that **God is Holy**. They're saying that God is perfect in every way – in all He does, and there is no one like Him. And that's why we can speak of the **beauty of holiness** – because it's God's Holiness that makes Him so beautiful – so amazing – so worthy of our praise and devotion and trust.

It's what sets God apart from everything and everyone else.

This is where someone needs to say "**Amen... Hallelujah... Praise the LORD!**" -----

And as if this wasn't already holy ground we're treading on, in the mercy and grace of God, in the mystery of the gospel, the **Holy Spirit** – the Spirit of this **Holy** God – the Spirit of **Holiness** – comes to **reside and live in and give life to us** – to bring the beauty and life-giving holiness of God to bear in our lives, and our life together!



Again, this is where someone needs to say "**Amen...**"

**Hallelujah... Praise the LORD!"** -----

For in the grace and mystery of God, this is what God promised long ago, this is what the New Testament describes, and this is what God's people have experienced in Christ down through the centuries...

Listen again to **Ezekiel 36** and what God said He would do...

Note the dual-dynamics of holiness here... **Ezekiel 36:24f**

- *I will cleanse you from all your impurities and from all your idols.*
- *I will **give you** a new heart and put a new spirit in you.*
- *I will **remove** from you your heart of stone & give you a heart of flesh.*
- *I **will put** my Spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws.*

What is Ezekiel describing here, but the beauty and life-giving holiness of God coming to bear in God's people – in us – by the Spirit...!

And note **the dual dynamics** of God's Holiness at work in us: cleansing us from all of our impurities and idolatries, removing our heart of stone – and giving us a new heart – God's heart – and a new Spirit – God's Spirit – empowering us to walk in God's ways...

And let's linger on this "**heart of stone**" piece for a moment. What's this about? I've always viewed it as a really vague metaphor.

**But it's not.** It's actually very explicit. Because throughout the Old Testament (particularly the psalms) we find this principal that tells us: *we become like what we worship*. And so if we worship a lifeless idol (anything other than God) we will become like that idol – and lose our humanity...

**Psalm 135:15f** is an example.

*The idols of the nations are silver and gold, made by human hands. They have mouths, but cannot speak, eyes, but cannot see. They have ears, but cannot hear, nor is there breath in their mouths. **Those who make them will be like them**, and so will all who trust in them.*

**Those who make them will be like them.** Our eyes will no longer see, our ears will no longer hear, our hearts will no longer beat with the heart of God. It will be as though our hearts are stone... just like the idols the nations worshipped.

But in the grace of God, through the gospel, the Spirit comes to **renew our hearts** – to **remove** our heart of stone and **give** us a heart of flesh... a new heart that lives and moves – that **beats** as God intended – a heart that desires what God desires, that craves what God craves, that delights in what is God celebrates as good and true and beautiful and lovely.

*Are not the **Beatitudes** a description of exactly this?* This new heart that the Spirit gives... **a heart that** is God-reliant, not self-reliant... **a heart that** mourns over all that is sinful and broken in the

world and in ourselves... **a heart that's** meek – that doesn't desperately grasp for control, but trusts God in and through all things... **a heart that** hungers and thirsts for righteousness – for God's good will and ways to reign in all things... **a heart that** is merciful – as God is merciful... and on an on...

The **Beatitudes** are just a description of the new heart that the Spirit comes to grow in stony-hearted people like me and you... Glimpses of the beauty and life-giving holiness of God coming to bear in our hearts and lives...

Similarly, Paul's description of the fruit of the Spirit in **Galatians 5:22**. Just another description of the beauty of God's holiness coming to bear in us – by the Spirit.

### **So, how does it happen?**

***How does the Spirit bring the beauty and life-giving holiness of God to bear in us?***

Because we know it doesn't happen **automatically**. In the moment of our conversion, we do not experience all this – this radical, deep, complete transformation from **un**-holiness to holiness, from stony-dead hearts to hearts that beat with the pure and beautiful passions of God. No matter how much we may want that, it's simply not the case. Every Christian who has ever lived is proof of this.

We need to understand **how** the Holy Spirit makes us holy...  
**how** the Spirit sanctifies us. For in truth, when the Bible speaks about sanctification – about our becoming holy – it is always describing **two** realities – **two** experiences – **two** processes – that are both integral to the work of grace.

And Paul's letter to the **Ephesians** is a great example of this.

In **Ephesians 1:1**, in the opening verse, **Paul writes**, "*Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, to God's holy people in Ephesus, the faithful in Christ Jesus.*"

To **God's holy people**...

And **yet as we keep reading**, we discover that these people are **not** living holy lives... And Paul has to address this.

So, how can Paul say this?

Well, he can say this (and he does in almost all of his letters) because in the grace of God, in the grace of the gospel, when we are united with Christ, **we are declared holy** – in the sense that our sin has been covered and paid for and dealt with in the atoning death of Jesus. That in Him we are now known and accepted by God as **holy** and **set apart** for His purposes.

In this sense, everyone who is in Christ **is holy**. Sanctified.

**And yet**, as we keep reading Paul's letter, we find Paul talking about the Spirit's **transforming work in us** – **sanctifying** us – making

us holy – in ways reminiscent of **Ezekiel 36**... the Spirit bringing the beauty and life-giving holiness of God to bear in us – in our hearts and minds and lives and relationships.

And **always**, Paul speaks of this (as do all the New Testament writers) as ***an ongoing endeavor*** – a life-long process – over time, as we **cooperate with the Spirit**...

Not that **we** sanctify ourselves. We don't.

But the Spirit sanctifies us, makes us holy, transforms our hearts and lives – *as we **cooperate** with the Spirit's grace in us.*

And this life of cooperation with the Spirit in the pursuit of holiness is what Paul refers to as "life in the Spirit" or "**walking in the Spirit**" or "keeping in step with the Spirit".

And **it's something we must learn... and CAN – by the empowering grace of the Spirit.**

It doesn't come naturally or automatically, and it's never done. Not until the kingdom comes in its' fullness.

**But, by the Spirit, we must and can learn to walk this way.**

And we need to understand this – because if we don't, we'll find ourselves (as many of us have, I'm sure) we'll find ourselves confronted with our abiding sin – and ***angry and disappointed*** with God, ***blaming*** God that He hasn't done what He's supposed to do, or

losing heart that the gospel simply doesn't work for us, or worse, doesn't work at all...

I remember sitting with a friend years ago – a leader in his church – whose life was in **shambles** due to his abiding, hidden sin – sin that was no longer now hidden... And he was broken – **and angry**. And confused. Wondering why, for all of his desperate prayers, God had never stopped him or removed his sinful desires.

But that's not how the Holy Spirit works.

That's not what the New Testament teaches.

For in the crisis of our conversion we are sanctified in the sense that we are accepted by God in Christ and **set apart** for His purposes.

But the transformation of our hearts and lives – our **becoming holy** – is something that only happens as we learn to walk in the Spirit, and actually do it... to **cooperate** with the Spirit... by the gracious power of the Spirit.

As Paul says in **Galatians 5:16** – "*So I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the sinful nature.*"

**Walk**, he says. Not float. Not **let go and let God**. Not surrender all and God will do the rest. But **WALK – walk by the Spirit**.

And, in his letters, Paul explains what he means. He doesn't exhort us to something vague or impossible. He unpacks what walking

by the Spirit looks like – with **realistic hope and confidence** that this life by the Spirit is **possible** and **available** for all who are in Christ.

Yes, we'll stumble and struggle in this. But by the Spirit, all who are in Christ, **can** learn to walk – in the way of Christ... **This is why the Spirit has come – to bring the beauty and life-giving holiness of God to bear in us... to live in us...**

**Next Sunday**, Tom Cowan will be our guest, and will take us into **Galatians 5** and what it means to "walk by the Spirit". If you want to read ahead, spend some time reading and praying through in Galatians 5:13f.

**But for now** – I want to acknowledge that some of you might be frustrating with me. Frustrated why we're not into the **how-to** now. Frustrated that we spent a whole morning talking about the Holiness of God and that this is what the Spirit wants to bring about in us – instead of actually diving into the **how-to** of walking in the Spirit.

And reason is – that apart from the grace of the Spirit, we don't actually want to be holy.

This is something I'm wrestling with these days – discovering... I'm realizing how often I've said that for all of our desire, apart from grace we can't follow God's ways. But it's not true. Because our brokenness is deeper than that. Truth is, apart from God's grace, we don't actually want to follow God's ways.

As much as we may hate our sin, we also love it. Crave it. Want it. It's a familiar and consoling companion that we don't actually want to leave behind...

And so part of the journey toward holiness means coming to terms with the reality that we don't actually hate our sin.

We may hate the impact it has on us... the shame we feel... the regret it stirs in us... But we don't actually hate our sin...

And so today, we need to embrace the reality that the way forward is through repentance – because – no amount of **how-to** matters until we **want-to**.

And that is as much a work of grace as anything...

And that is the reality for many of us – that we need to acknowledge... and confess and seek God for.

That's the soil from which Holiness grows – from the grace of revelation and repentance. Confessing, acknowledging that for all of our regret, we don't actually want to give up our sin. We want holiness, but not at the cost of the things that we have become so familiar with – that have sustained us for so long...

And this is where grace begins – exposing our sin for all that it is and awakening our hearts and minds to truly see God and His grace as better.

*for His glory, for the sake of the world, and for our joy in Him...*  
*Amen.*

### **Benediction – Jude v.24-25**

*"To him who is able to keep you from stumbling and to present you before his glorious presence without fault and with great joy—to the only God our Saviour be glory, majesty, power and authority, through Jesus Christ our Lord, before all ages, now and forevermore! Amen."*