



# TRUTH APPLICATIONS

Sermon Notes

## Called to Holiness

2 Corinthians 6:14-7:1

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### *Our World Is Different*

I took my monthly issue of *First Things* to the doctor's office one day and while waiting was able to read several pages. Here are just two things I noticed.

- Relative to the new "Yes means yes" sexual assault policies on college campuses, editor R. R. Reno wrote: "The stricter policies are needed because we've deregulated the intimate interactions between men and women. Our public culture no longer permits us to articulate moral limits on sexual relations, other than consent and a vague standard of decency. . . . To say otherwise oppresses and stigmatizes people by suggesting that their sexual choices are wrong."<sup>1</sup>
- One of the five books included in the review section of the journal was *Making Gay Okay: How Rationalizing Homosexual Behavior Is Changing Everything*, by Robert Reilly.<sup>2</sup>

Unless you've been in a coma for several years, you're not surprised to hear of such things. I mention them to reinforce how different things are from what they should be.

I also cite them as a gateway to other concerns. First, I fear that things like I've mentioned will become so common that we will come to accept them as normal and find ways to accommodate them with church belief and practice, continuing the "arms-length Christianity"<sup>3</sup> where we adjust our stance on what is acceptable in correlation to changing cultural views.<sup>4</sup>

Second, I am concerned with how we respond in other ways in light of changes like those described above. Some challenges are more subtle and can catch us unprepared because we have not thought about how Jesus' way relates to them. Challenged as we are by more extreme cases, it can become easier to live with things that "are not as bad."

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<sup>1</sup> R. R. Reno, "The Public Square," *First Things* 247 (November 2014): 3.

<sup>2</sup> Ephraim Radner, "Sin's Nature," *First Things* 247 (November 2014): 65-66.

<sup>3</sup> A phrase I first heard in a sermon by Bruce McLarty.

<sup>4</sup> As a simple example of this shifting standard, think about how we respond when asked about profanity in a movie or television program. Even what is typically labeled "not that bad" (or something similar) goes far beyond the single word that made *Gone with the Wind* notable in this regard.

In the next few sermons I will reinforce the New Testament's call to be different. The focus will be on reasons and principles, not specific behavioral applications.

### *Jesus Calls for Difference*

We need to know the Bible as well as we can. But we need to realize that we can grow accustomed to and lose the sense of amazement at how radically different and demanding some of Jesus' teaching was. Hearing it for the first time, the first disciples responded differently. Consider two illustrations.

- They resisted Jesus' words about self-denial and taking up the cross (Mark 16:21-24).
- They were "greatly astonished" when they heard him tell a law-keeping rich man that entrance into God's kingdom depended on him selling everything and giving it to the poor. From that the disciples were to learn that a camel was more likely to squeeze through the eye of a needle than that a rich man would enter heaven's kingdom. Incredulous, they asked, "Who then can be saved?" (Matt. 19:16-30).

Early church preachers were no less direct about the incredulous reactions the ancient world had to Christianity's different way. Paul said, "the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing" (1 Cor. 1:18). This was true of both Jews who saw "Christ crucified" as "a stumbling block" ("scandal," CEB; σκάνδαλον, *skandalon*) and Greeks who saw it as "folly" (μωρία, *mōria*) (1 Cor. 1:23).

### *Another Word for Difference*

New Testament writers regularly referred to the different life of believers as a calling. To those in idolatrous Ephesus, for example, Paul emphasized "the hope to which he has called you" (Eph. 1:18). He challenged them to "walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called" (4:1). He told them that there was but "one hope that belongs to your call" (4:4). And he told them that this calling meant putting off the customary way of living in favor of a "new self, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness" (4:24).

Since God is who calls us, we are not surprised to be called to holiness. That is his core attribute and has always been the standard for his people, in both testaments. Peter recalled this when he wrote, "but as he who called you is holy, you also be holy in all your conduct, *since it is written*, 'You shall be holy, for I am holy'" (1:15-16; citing Lev. 11:44). He stressed it again when he said God's people are "being built up as a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood" (2:5).

Other New Testament writings also emphasize holiness. Paul told believers to "present your bodies as a sacrifice — alive, holy, and pleasing to God" (Rom. 12:1; NET). He said God "saved us and called us to a holy calling" (2 Tim. 1:9). He called the church God's "holy temple" (1 Cor. 3:17; Eph. 2:21). From Hebrews we learn that God disciplines his children "for our good, that we may share his holiness" and therefore we are to make sure to "strive . . . for the holiness without which no one will see the Lord" (Heb. 12:10, 14).

### *Serious About Holiness*

In 2 Corinthians 6:14-7:1, Paul focus on holiness like a laser. Notice three things.

First, holiness must be understood in light of reconciliation. Paul says that we should be "bringing holiness to completion in *the fear of God*" (7:1). "The fear of God" is important here,

not just because of the behavior it implies, but also because it brings closure to the section begun in 5:11: “Therefore, knowing *the fear of the Lord*, we persuade others.” Between those two statements, Paul reviews the essence of our message and calling. That is the context of holiness.

- He lived to persuade others because “[Christ] died for all, that those who live might no longer live for themselves but for him who for their sake died and was raised” (5:11-15).
- Consequently, we no longer live “according to the flesh.” Like everyone else in Christ, we are “a new creation” (5:16-17) and have “been reconciled to God” (5:18-20).
- How serious should we be about our new status? Consider the example of Paul who endured afflictions, hardships, and calamities, dealt with slander, and was called an imposter, all while remaining true to his calling (6:1-10).
- If we miss reconciliation and relationship with God, we will misunderstand holiness.

Second, the call to holiness is a call to absolute refusal to compromise with the world (6:14-16a). Believers cannot be hitched up to unbelievers. Righteousness cannot partner with lawlessness. Light cannot co-exist with darkness. Christ and Belial (Satan) have no accord with one another. The “temple of God” can have no “agreement with idols.”

Verses 14-16 are comprehensive in scope. When we think of Corinth, we generally also think of the sensuality which was everywhere around them and in which many of them had actively participated (see 1 Cor. 6:9-11; chapters 8, 10 [dealing with idolatry]). To be holy was to stay away from such things. But that’s not the whole story. Think of Satan’s schemes (Eph. 6:11) and the nature of idolatry. Idol-statues are just one way materialism shows itself. Often, the temptation is far more subtle. Holiness requires us to resist the subtle things, too, however common they are in society at large.

Third, Paul shows the motivation for holiness. From multiple Old Testament texts cited in vv. 16b-18 (Lev. 26:12; Isa. 52:11; Ezek. 20:41; Ex. 4:22; 1 Sam. 7:8, 14; Isa. 43:6), we learn that God dwells with us; that we are not just his subjects, but also his people; and that when we commit ourselves to holiness, he will welcome us, be a father to us, and allow us to be his sons and daughters. “Since we have these promises, beloved, let us cleanse ourselves from every defilement of body and spirit, bringing holiness to completion in the fear of God” (7:1).

### *Another Reminder of Our Calling*

Another article in my issue of *First Things* analyzed the state of Protestantism in anticipation of 2017’s 500th anniversary of the advent of the Reformation. The authors pointed out that “it will . . . be necessary to take stock of the massive demographic shift in Protestantism from the North Atlantic to the Global South. Shortly before 1917, an estimated 11 percent of the world’s Protestant Christians lived outside Europe or the United States; today that number stands at an astonishing 73 percent and is growing.”<sup>5</sup>

Those numbers serve as another reminder that we live in a different world. Things are getting no easier for us. We have confidence in God’s sovereignty. But, we must give even more attention to our call to holiness.

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<sup>5</sup> Thomas Albert Howard and Mark A. Noll, “The Reformation at Five Hundred,” *First Things* 247 (November 2014), 47-48.