

Dead Church Podcast Notes

Acts Initiative

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Ep. 11 – Lies Christians Believe About Holiness

Throughout this series, we've talked about what it means to change the way we're living and start obeying God out of loyalty and fidelity to him. He wants us to be people who live the way Jesus lived – he loved others with a radical love that led him to leave everything he had behind, make himself nothing and die in order to rescue us. He wants us loving others with that same extreme love.

By its very essence, this is not a love that can just be tacked onto our lives. It's not a kind of love that we can continue living life (making all our decisions and setting all our priorities) the same way everyone else in the world does.

This kind of love will redefine our lives. It will redefine what is most important to us. It will redefine how we make our decisions. It will make us different than everyone else around us.

In Scripture, we are clearly called to live holy lives. *Holy* is a word that most Christians are familiar with. However, as we've seen already throughout this series, we often read words in the Bible and bring our own definitions into Scripture rather than looking for what Scripture is actually telling us that word means. For example, *repentance* doesn't mean feeling sorry and confessing. *Faith* doesn't mean believing. *Love* doesn't mean having affection and being nice.

In the same way, *holiness* is often misunderstood in the Church today. A lot of Christians think of being holy as meaning that we're supposed to not sin. That's certainly part of it – but it's not actually what the word means, and because it's not what the word means, it's only part of what the Bible means when it tells us to live holy lives.

The word *holy* in ancient Hebrew and ancient Greek means *set apart*. It means that there is some kind of distinction that makes something or someone different than everything or everyone else. Essentially, being *holy* means being different.

God is holy because God is so vastly different than anything we can imagine that we can't even begin to wrap our minds around him. He is different than us. He's different than any other god that any other religion worships. He is different than anything else – even the other spiritual beings in heaven. This makes God holy. He is set apart. He is different.

When God established the nation of Israel, he told them that they needed to be holy because he is holy. In other words, he told them that they need to be different than all the other nations because he is different than all the other gods.

“The LORD said to Moses, “Tell all the people of Israel: “I am the LORD your God. You must be holy because I am holy.””¹

“Be my holy people. Be holy because I am the LORD your God. Remember and obey my laws. I am the LORD, and I have made you holy.”²

“So you must be holy to me because I, the LORD, am holy, and I have set you apart from other people to be my own.”³

“Remember my commands and obey them; I am the LORD. Do not defile my name. You

¹ Leviticus 19:1-2

² Leviticus 20:7-8

³ Leviticus 20:26

Israelites must remember that I am holy; I am the LORD, who has made you holy. I brought you out of Egypt to be your God. I am the LORD.”⁴

The Israelites were called God’s holy people because he chose them out of all the other nations to be his own. They were given their own holy land – a land ruled by Yahweh – unlike all the nations of the Gentiles that worshiped and served false gods. Israel was different from these other nations in that they were called to carefully obey God’s commands.

In ancient times, at least during the times that Israel was genuinely obeying God, there was a noticeable difference between the Israelites and the other people of the world. They were holy. They were different. You would’ve been able to see the difference between them and the other people of the nations around them because the way they lived was different.

In fact, we can see how the nations around them noticed that they were different when we look at how the people of those nations talked about the people of Israel. In the book of Esther, Haman (the bad guy) described the people of Israel this way:

“Then Haman said to King Ahasuerus, “There is a certain group of people scattered among the other people in all the states of your empire. Their laws are different from those of all the other people, and they do not obey the king’s laws. It is not right for you to allow them to continue living in your kingdom. If it is good to the king, let it be decreed to destroy those people.”⁵

When the people of Israel were obeying God, they were holy. Their laws were different. They were different. They were so different than everyone else that the people in all the rest of the world noticed how different they were.

The same should be said of the Church.

The Church is also called to be holy. This means the same thing for us – we are called by God to be different than all the other people of the world.

“Therefore dear friends, we have these promises from God, so we should make ourselves pure – free from anything that makes body or soul unclean. We should try to become holy in the way we live, in the fear of God.”⁶

“But be holy in all you do, just as God, the One who called you, is holy. Because it is written in the Scriptures: ‘You must be holy, because I am holy.’”⁷

“You should live holy lives and serve God, as you wait for and look forward to the coming of the day of God.”⁸

Israel was supposed to be holy – different than everyone else – because they were supposed to live the way God wanted them to live. The Church is also supposed to be holy – different than everyone else – because we’re supposed to live the way God wants us to live. It’s more than just “not sinning” – it’s about how we live our lives.

Paul described it this way:

“Therefore brothers and sisters, since God has shown us great mercy, I urge you to offer your lives as a living sacrifice to him. Your offering must be holy and pleasing to him, which is the true way for you to worship. Do not be conformed to this world; instead be transformed by a new way of thinking.”⁹

Paul taught that we should offer our entire lives as a living sacrifice to God. That means everything about our day-to-day lives should be given to God, and everything about our day-to-day lives should be different than everyone else in the world. Paul taught that this is the true way for us to

⁴ Leviticus 22:31-33

⁵ Esther 3:8-9

⁶ 2 Corinthians 7:11

⁷ 1 Peter 1:15-16

⁸ 2 Peter 3:11-12

⁹ Romans 12:1-2

worship. True worship is not about singing songs and raising your hands. True worship is about how you live your life.

In ancient Israel, those who feared God understood that true worship of God was not about the sacrifices, the worship songs, or the prayers. They understood that true worship of God was about living life the way he wants – and therefore being different than everyone else.

This was consistently the message of the prophets.¹⁰ God didn't want their sacrifices, he didn't want their songs, and he didn't want their prayers. He wanted their lives to be different. He wanted them to live for him. When they didn't live their lives correctly, he told them he wouldn't even listen to their music or songs. They could raise their hands and sing songs all day, but if their lives were wrong, it wasn't worship and God wasn't listening.

Paul said the same thing: our true worship is how we live our day-to-day lives. Our true worship is when we live lives that make us different than everyone else because we give everything to God.

Furthermore, Paul said that we shouldn't look like this world. When he said, "do not be conformed to this world," it could be translated, "do not be pressed into a mold by this world."

Here's what that means:

I have a friend who knows a lot about making plastic molds. He is a really good artist and he has, at times, made plastic molds for a living. A few years ago, I noticed a magnet on his refrigerator. It looked exactly like a real chocolate-chip cookie. It was extraordinary. It was so lifelike. If he had set it in a pile of real cookies, it would have blended right in, and I would have tried to eat it. Everything about it was super-realistic. I asked him how he made it.

I'm going to really botch the explanation here, but he essentially poured some kind of plastic resin over a real chocolate-chip cookie, he let it dry, then he pulled the real cookie out of the plastic. This left him with a perfect plastic mold of that cookie. Then he poured some more plastic into that mold and let it dry. When he separated the new plastic from the mold, he had an exact duplicate of the original chocolate-chip cookie. It perfectly reproduced every crack, every pore, and every bump. Then he painted it, stuck a magnet inside it, and placed it on his fridge.

When Paul told us to not be conformed to this world, he was telling us to not let the world be a mold that shapes how our lives look. If the world is a mold of a cookie, we need to make sure that we're not the plastic being poured into the mold. We need to make sure that we don't let the world make us look exactly like that cookie.

Paul was not just saying, "Make sure you go to church, read your Bible, and don't do bad things." Paul was saying, "Everything about your lives needs to be different – not just different from who you used to be, but different than everyone else in the world. You can't live your day-to-day lives the same way that everyone else in the world does. You can't make your decisions the same way. You cannot let your life – your plans, your decisions, your priorities, your lifestyle – be shaped by the world around you. You cannot just adopt their way of life. You must be different."

We should look different than unbelievers in our day-to-day lives. There should be such a stark contrast between us and the unbelievers around us that everyone knows we are different simply by the way we live. After all, Jesus said, "All people will know that you are my disciples if you love each other."¹¹

Jesus said our love should be a kind of love that makes us different than everyone else in the world. It should make us stand out. This is also what Jesus meant when he told us to let our light shine before men:

¹⁰ Ref. Hosea 6:6, 8:13; Amos 5:21-24; Psalm 40:6-8; Isaiah 1:11-20, 58:3-11; Proverbs 21:3; 1 Samuel 15:22-23; Micah 6:6-8

¹¹ John 13:35

“You are the salt of the earth. But if the salt loses its salty taste, it cannot be made salty again. It is good for nothing, except to be thrown out and walked on. You are the light that gives light to the world. A city that is built on a hill cannot be hidden. And people don’t light a lamp and then hide it under a bowl. They put it on a lampstand so the light shines for all the people in the house. In the same way let your light shine for people to see, so that they will see the good things you do and will praise your Father in heaven.”¹²

Our lives should be so different than the world around us that we are a light shining out into the world – giving light to everyone.

This is what it means for us to be holy. This is what it means to “love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength.”¹³ It means we give him our whole lives. We shine for him. We represent him. We look like him, and not like this world. We’re different because he is different.

Unfortunately, in the Church today, a lot of Christians don’t understand what it means to be different than the world. A lot of Christians don’t understand just how much God wants us to stand out – how much he wants us to shine. Few Christians would recognize that they don’t understand what this means, but their lifestyle, their decisions, their priorities, and their goals show that the kingdom of God is not what is most important to them.

Jesus said, “Be concerned above all else with God’s kingdom and his righteousness. Then all your other needs will be met as well.”¹⁴

This verse is usually translated, “Seek first the kingdom of God...” but I chose this translation because we’re all familiar with the phrase “seek first the kingdom of God.” We know the Bible tells us to seek first the kingdom, and most Christians would say that they *do* seek first the kingdom.

But most Christians today don’t even know what that means.

Seeking first the kingdom of God means we are concerned about God’s kingdom before anything and everything else. It is our top priority. And if it’s our top priority, then it’s how we make our decisions – it shapes the way we live our daily lives.

Think of it this way:

If you work a standard Monday to Friday, 9-5 job, and I call you up and ask if you want to go to the movies at noon on Wednesday, you’ll probably say no. You have to work. Why? Because work is your priority. Does it mean you don’t want to go to the movies? No, not necessarily. But you prioritize work because it’s what’s most important to you. It pays your bills, it gives you food, and it keeps a roof over your head. You know that if you prioritize something else over work, you might lose your job, and that’s a bigger priority to you than almost anything else. Therefore, it dictates how you make your decisions.

The Kingdom of God should be our top priority. It’s not just that we like the Kingdom of God, we think about it, we look forward to Heaven, and we sing songs to Jesus. No – seeking first the Kingdom means it comes before anything and everything else. It should be how we make our decisions. Nothing comes before it.

In the same way that you prioritize your job over hanging out with your friends, you should also prioritize the Kingdom of God over everything else. You don’t make decisions or plans that will interfere with what you should be doing for the Kingdom.

If, when you make plans, you plan to do other things first, and the Kingdom isn’t your top priority, then it shows that the Kingdom is not what you are seeking first.

Here’s another way of thinking about it:

Tess and I live in a tiny house. We found a school bus on eBay, we converted it into a tiny

¹² Matthew 5:13-16

¹³ Ref. Deuteronomy 6:5; Matthew 22:37-38

¹⁴ Matthew 6:33

house over the course of about seven months, and we live in it full-time. Ever since moving into our tiny house, I've met countless people who also want to one day live in a tiny house. Usually they're young. Usually they don't have or make much money. Usually they're not already in a place where they can afford to build their own tiny house. When I talk to these people, I can usually tell fairly quickly whether they actually want to live in a tiny house or if it's just a thing they dream about. I can tell what they really want, not by what they say, but by how they live.

If someone tells me they want to live in a tiny house someday, but they don't have the means of doing it right then, I'll often ask them about how they are living day-to-day. If they're still going to the movies, eating out at restaurants, buying nice clothes, going shopping for fun, buying music or movies or tv shows or video games, buying a nice car, or any other things like these, I can tell that they don't really want to live in a tiny house. They might think they do, but they don't.

Why? How can I know?

Because if someone really wants to do something, they'll change how they're living now in order to get that thing later. And if someone can't afford to build or buy a tiny house now, but they're spending their money on other things, it shows that those other things are their priority. They care more about having the comforts and pleasures of movies, restaurants, and music than they do about one day living in a tiny house. Therefore, yes, they might dream about living in a tiny house, but what they actually want is to go out to a nice restaurant tonight and then to go to the movies. What they actually want is to relax and listen to music right now. And because they're choosing to have a certain lifestyle right now, they'll never be able to afford to build or buy a tiny house – at least not any time soon. The decisions someone makes about how they spend their time and money show what they truly care about and prioritize.

The Kingdom of God is the same way.

If we say we want the Kingdom of God, we say we want to live for God, we say we want to please God, but we show by our lifestyle and our decisions that we have higher priorities, then we show by our lifestyle that we don't really want the Kingdom of God, we don't really want to live for God, and we don't really care about pleasing God.

Jesus said the Kingdom of God is something you give up everything to get:

“The kingdom of heaven is like a treasure hidden in a field. One day a man found the treasure, and then he hid it in the field again. He was so excited that he went and sold everything he owned to buy that field. Also, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant looking for fine pearls. When he found a very valuable pearl, he went and sold everything he had and bought it.”¹⁵

The man in Jesus' parable shows that he really wants the Kingdom of God because he prioritized it – he went and sold everything he had to get it. It came first.

So many Christians think they want the Kingdom of God because they *say* they do, and they even *think* they do. But they show by their decisions that they have higher priorities. They show by their lifestyle that they want something else more than they want God. In other words, they honor God with their lips, but their hearts are far from him.¹⁶ They do things for God, but they don't make God everything. They don't offer their entire lives to him. Even though they say they love God, and they think they love God, their lives show that they've been conformed to this world. They're not different. They're not holy.

Becoming a Christian means we start to live for God. We seek first the Kingdom. Seeking first the Kingdom of God means exactly what it says – it comes first! It comes before anyone and anything else. It is the highest priority. That means you make your plans around it. Your decisions are centered on it. You don't make your decisions and plan your life the way the rest of the world does. The

¹⁵ Matthew 13:44-46

¹⁶ Ref. Matthew 15:7-9

Kingdom of God is what you value. It's what you prioritize. It is everything.

This is consistently the message of the New Testament:

“You don't care about the things of God, but only about things people think are important... If people want to follow me, they must give up the things they want. They must take up their cross and follow me. Those who want to save their lives will give up true life. But those who give up their lives for me and for the Good News will have true life. It is worthless to have the whole world if they lose their souls.”¹⁷

“Whoever does not carry his own cross and follow me cannot be my follower.”¹⁸

“...you must give up everything you have to be my follower.”¹⁹

“Our only goal is to please God whether we live here or there, because we must all stand before Christ to be judged. Each of us will receive what we should get – good or bad – for the things we did in the earthly body. Therefore since we know what it means to fear the Lord, we try to persuade people.”²⁰

“If I still wanted to please people, I would not be a slave of Christ.”²¹

“To me the only important thing about living is Christ...”²²

“Your faith makes you offer your lives as a sacrifice in serving God.”²³

“Those things were important to me, but now I think they are worth nothing because of Christ. Not only those things, but I think that all things are worth nothing compared with the superior value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. Because of him, I have lost all those things, and now I consider them worthless trash. This allows me to have Christ and to be united with him.”²⁴

These are just a few examples. The New Testament consistently teaches that becoming a Christian means you change everything about your life. God becomes everything to you. His Kingdom becomes the only thing you think about, and the only thing you consider when you make your decisions and your plans.

Many Christians understand this concept. They understand the principles of it. Like the person who says they want to live in a tiny house, they would say they want to seek first the Kingdom, live entirely for the Kingdom, and prioritize the Kingdom in everything they do. But practically, their actions show that they have other higher priorities... and often they don't even seem to realize it.

Throughout the next few videos, I want to focus on a few practical topics. I can't go through every single topic that comes up in human life. But I want to go through a few examples and show how Christians have gotten their priorities out of line with Scripture. They think they're living for the Kingdom when they're not. Their actions show that the Kingdom is not their highest priority. The principle behind all these topics applies to every aspect of life, whether covered in these videos or not. That principle is this: The Kingdom of God, and what God wants are what determine your plans, your actions, and everything you do. Period.

¹⁷ Mark 8:33-36

¹⁸ Luke 14:27

¹⁹ Luke 14:33

²⁰ 2 Corinthians 5:9-11

²¹ Galatians 1:10

²² Philippians 1:21

²³ Philippians 2:17

²⁴ Philippians 3:7-9