

The Holy, Sinful Church

DAVE BAST

Humans are sinful – we know that – and Christians are human; so, well, Christians are sinful; and yet we say that the Church is holy. So, does it make sense to say that a community of sinners is the *holy* Church? What difference does this identity make for you? Stay tuned.

BOB HEERSPINK

From ReFrame Media and Words of Hope, this is *Groundwork*, where we dig into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Bob Heerspink.

DAVE BAST

And I am Dave Bast. So Bob, we are in this series on the Church; the one, holy, catholic Church. We are going to think about that word, *holy*, today; and yet, how often haven't you heard the criticism: The Church is full of hypocrites.

BOB HEERSPINK

Oh, I heard that from people outside the Church, and even from people inside the Church when I was a parish pastor.

DAVE BAST

Yes; maybe once a month or so...

BOB HEERSPINK

Once a month, yes.

DAVE BAST

Tell me a new one. I have dealt with that before. My reaction tends to be to agree. There are hypocrites in the Church. All of us to some degree are hypocrites.

BOB HEERSPINK

Well, there are. A hypocrite is really someone who wears a mask, so we are really talking about someone who projects something that they are not. I have talked to people who, even as they have talked about their great humility, are obviously proud people. The very way they talk, they project a façade of holiness. When you scratch beneath the surface, things are really out of kilter in their lives.

DAVE BAST

Well, I think the biggest thing that bugs folks about this is when there is such a disparity between what we profess and the way we live. I was just talking to a young friend the other day who said: You know, the thing about Christians is... and he is a Christian himself... we preach love all the time, but when you see us in action, all too often it is hate; and that really is a turn off.

BOB HEERSPINK

Yes; when Christians proclaim grace but then project *un-grace* to the world around them, you know; that is one of the biggest stumbling blocks, I find. As a parish pastor, I worked with folks who were considering the

claims of Jesus Christ. You know, here comes Christ with a message of grace, and yet, they get near the Church and they are just feeling this tension of judgment; and as one person said to me in one of my churches: You know, I really can't be in this church because I am not good enough. Everybody here seems so put together. They've got their life under control, and that is not me. I thought that was one of the most sad, tragic statements I ever heard from a parishioner, because where do you come but to the Church to experience grace and love and acceptance; and here she was saying: I am a sinner, but I am not good enough to be a part of this body.

DAVE BAST

And she hears this message of grace, but what she experiences is judgment and rejection and you don't measure up; you're not good enough. Yes; or I think, too, of the common experience I have heard from people who say: Just don't do business with those Christians. You know, it is okay to go to church with them on Sunday, but when you are in the business world in the week you better watch out.

BOB HEERSPINK

Yes, I was talking to someone just this week, where they said: I would much rather deal with a non-Christian than with anyone who brings their faith into their business; and that really was tragic.

DAVE BAST

Wow; that is an indictment!

BOB HEERSPINK

That *is* an indictment.

DAVE BAST

That ought to bother us; that ought to upset us; but you know, really, I think we need to distinguish between hypocrisy – between the play-acting – between people who are pretending to be what they aren't – and ordinary, sort of garden-variety sinners, which we all are – people who fail to live up to our best aspirations, and who feel bad about that – who feel humbled by it – who feel repentant – penitent. The Church in that sense, yes, it is full of sinners, and it is okay, isn't it?

BOB HEERSPINK

Well, you know, we talked about holiness on this program today, but if you think about it, it is the hypocrite who says: Look at me, I am so holy. And you scratch beneath the surface and it is not there.

DAVE BAST

The Pharisee in Jesus' parable: God, I thank Thee that I am not like other men; even like this publican over here.

BOB HEERSPINK

Right; so if we are honest about ourselves, we stand up and say: Look at me; I am a sinner; I am Bob and I am a sinner. That is who I am; and that is what every Christian – every member of the Church – needs to confess, and continue to confess; and yet, at the same time we have this incredible claim that we are making today that the Church is holy.

DAVE BAST

So, let's go back to our initial question: How does it make sense to say as an active confessing our faith: I believe in the holy catholic church – the holy universal church – the worldwide church – if, in fact, at the same time we are acknowledging that we are a community of sinners? That is the thing that we want to explore in this program, and we need to look at the Bible and hear what it says about the subject of the holiness of the people of God.

BOB HEERSPINK

Right, because we have been looking at the Church from a human point of view. We need to shift gears and take a look at the Church from God's point of view; and then I think we make a discovery about the fact that we confess or we believe a holy Church. We don't always *see* it, but we *believe* it; and we will have to explore what that means...

DAVE BAST

We take it by faith... we take it by faith.

BOB HEERSPINK

Right.

DAVE BAST

Because the Bible says so.

BOB HEERSPINK

Right; and when we come back we will need to explore exactly what that means.

Segment 2

DAVE BAST

This is *Groundwork*, where we dig into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Dave Bast.

BOB HEERSPINK

And I am Bob Heerspink. Okay, Dave, we have been talking about this confession that the Church is holy, and you know, as I think about that, it seems a delusion at best. We are just kidding ourselves when we say: Hey, we are a sinless people; and at worst it is self praise. In fact, at worst it seems like we are putting down other people. We are saying: Hey, I'm holy and you're not. And yet, this has been a core confession of the Church for thousands of years; even in the face of all kinds of failure on the part of the Church.

DAVE BAST

Yes, wow! Look at the history of the Church; if you know anything about it, you see the failure loud and clear; but it is a core confession because it is a core teaching in the Bible, going right back, deep into the Old Testament, and it is based on a core idea of the Bible, the theme of covenant. Now, that is a really big one, and I don't think you can understand the story of the Bible or the God of the Bible unless you grasp this idea of covenant, which is basically God taking the initiative to establish a relationship with people that is based on promise. God makes certain promises and we respond in a certain way; and the beginning of the covenant really... it is a little more complicated than this, but I am going to simplify and ignore some of the early stuff and go straight to the heart of it at Mount Sinai in the book of Exodus Chapter 19. God had brought Israel out of Egypt by his mighty acts in humbling Pharaoh, and he brought them through the Red Sea, and he brought them to this mountain and he set up, now, the establishment of the covenant. So this is Exodus 19:

³The Lord called to Moses out of the mountain, saying, "Thus you shall say to the House of Jacob, and tell the people of Israel: ⁴'You yourselves have seen what I did to the Egyptians and how I bore you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself. ⁵Now, therefore, if you will indeed obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession among all peoples, for all the earth is mine; ⁶and you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.'"

BOB HEERSPINK

So, what you are suggesting is that we really go down the wrong road if we immediately think about holiness in terms of ethical quality. I mean, people say: He is a holy Joe. He is better than other people; but what this suggests is that, actually, holiness deals first of all with a relationship with God that is established by God, not first of all with our own inner qualities of ethical purity, so to speak.

DAVE BAST

Yes; before it is a quality it is a condition – can I put it that way?

BOB HEERSPINK

Right.

DAVE BAST

It is a status that we have by virtue of God's work in our life, and this is true in the New Testament, too.

BOB HEERSPINK

Well, the New Testament, of course, carries over that theme because the Church is the new Israel, and it is very interesting to see the same language that is used, Dave, of the Old Testament people; in fact, the very language that is found in that Exodus quote that you just read is picked up by Peter in 1 Peter 2, and he describes the Church this way. He says: You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation; a people for his own possession; that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light. So the same language that is being used of Israel now is used of us as God's people, the Church today.

DAVE BAST

Even the Exodus... Peter says God called us out of darkness into his light; and you think of those plagues, you know, the darkness that fell over Egypt, the night when the firstborn died and Israel escaped in the night. It is all kind of in the background of what Peter is saying, and he even quotes, essentially, the two lines from Exodus when he says of Christians: You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation; but we are not a nation, we are not an ethnic group, we are a multinational, multilingual body of Christians, and yet, we have the same status of holiness because of God's work.

BOB HEERSPINK

Yes, because here is where the covenant really explodes beyond just one ethnic group...

DAVE BAST

Exactly, yes.

BOB HEERSPINK

To all the world.

DAVE BAST

Right; it is no longer limited to the Jewish people.

BOB HEERSPINK

But you know, now I think if you look at these passages, Dave, it makes sense to say why we *believe* a holy Church. You know, it is not like we *see* a holy Church up front; but we confess it – we believe it – because behind our holiness is God's choosing.

DAVE BAST

We are really saying, first and foremost, that we believe that God has chosen and called a people to belong to himself; and that this people is no longer one race or one nationality or one ethnic group, but it is open to all who come to him through faith in Christ; and it begins with belonging to him. It is simply a given. God's people are holy in the sense that they are his.

BOB HEERSPINK

You know, to me, at the practical level this brings real comfort to ordinary folks like ourselves. I think of the people I served in ministry through the years in parish, and you know, all of us struggle with these issues. I

remember looking out over a congregation after having served a number of years, and saying: All of us have brokenness; all of us have failed; and so often I talk to people... I talked to someone the other day and they said: I am just a failure. Here is where you come with a message and say: You are holy in Jesus Christ. God has chosen you and you have this amazing identity that is rooted in what God has done for you.

DAVE BAST

I am just a failure, too. I feel the same way, you know? But here is the beautiful thing: Let me put it in kind of a summary form. We are holy because God has chosen us; he doesn't choose us because we were holy...

BOB HEERSPINK

Right.

DAVE BAST

The holiness is a *result* of the choosing, not a *cause* of it; and that is proclaimed in one of my favorite texts out of the book of Deuteronomy Chapter 7:

⁶For you are a people holy to the Lord your God; the Lord your God has chosen you to be a people for his treasured possession (Wow!) out of all the peoples who are on the face of the earth. ⁷It was not because you were more in number than any other people that the Lord set his love on you and chose you, for you were the fewest of all peoples, ⁸but it is because the Lord loves you... You know, that is what it says, and that is a beautiful truth. Why does God choose us? Because he loves us. Why does he love us? Because he loves us; there is no explanation beyond it.

BOB HEERSPINK

This is where grace breaks through and the holiness that we experience is totally of God's choosing grace; but, you know, Dave, I think here is where you look at this holiness and you really say: Hey, this deals with this whole concept of choosing or election, and this is a tough concept for a lot of people. You know, so often people say: Oh, election... it is about electing to privilege; but the truth of the matter is, if you look at a passage like this, God's choosing is for service – for a purpose – to be that treasured possession – to be a people that is on display in the world, where... you know, I think of the world looking at the Church and the world should say: Hey, these people are different. This is God's holy people. These people are set apart. These people are really different because of who they are in Jesus Christ.

DAVE BAST

Well, and it ought to make people want to join. There ought to be something so beautiful about the people of God that it makes others jealous, and say: I want that, too. I want what they have; and then they hear the good news: Well, you too can be chosen. You know, it is not a closed society. We don't pull up the drawbridge because the last ones have come in.

BOB HEERSPINK

Right.

DAVE BAST

All are welcome. If we could just be that, what a difference it would make for our life in the world.

BOB HEERSPINK

And if we can put that holiness on display, and that is where we really have to move from thinking about holiness as something God does to a holiness that we project to the world by how we live; and we need to talk about that when we come back in just a minute.

DAVE BAST

But first, let's talk about how you as listeners can interact with us in this program, *Groundwork*.
Segment 3

BOB HEERSPINK

Dave, we have said that holiness really roots, first of all, in what God does. To understand this confession of the Church as a holy Church, we have to say God is the One who chooses us. We have said holiness roots in this covenant relationship that we have with God; but, you know, you start to think about that and you say: Isn't this kind of a cop out? So, God just gives us this gift of holiness, then it doesn't matter how we live?

DAVE BAST

Well, I don't think we would want to say that; and I don't know that anyone does say that, actually, in the Church. The thing is, yes, we are holy, first and foremost because God has set his love upon us; he has called us to belong to himself – to be his people – and it is that set-apartness that constitutes real holiness; but when Christians begin to feel proud about that fact, and to kind of look down on other people... you know, "holier than thou," we even use that phrase... that is when they begin to smell bad to the world and to others, and that is when the charge of hypocrisy becomes justified. It is recognizing our identity as God's people, accepting the fact that he has called us to be different, to be apart, and then trying to really live that way with his love and grace toward the world while at the same recognizing, you know, yes, we are sinful, too. We are no different from you in that sense. We are no better than you.

BOB HEERSPINK

Well, that is where you have to come back to scripture and say holiness is a gift from God, but it is also our calling. You know, the scriptures say that God is holy: I am holy, says God; therefore, you be holy; and because God is this God of ethical perfection, there is this ethical component in holiness with regard to the way we are expected to live.

DAVE BAST

Well, it literally says that. You just paraphrased a verse from 1 Peter Chapter 1: ¹⁵As he who called you is holy, you also be holy in all your conduct, ¹⁶since it is written, "You shall be holy, for I am holy." And when Peter says: It is written, "You shall be holy, for I am holy," he is quoting the book of Leviticus, again, in the Old Testament. So, you know, there it is.

BOB HEERSPINK

Yes, there is in scripture this tension between who we are and what we are called to be. Now when I think about holiness one of my favorite verses comes from 1 Corinthians 1:2, where it says: To the church of God in Corinth, to those sanctified in Christ Jesus – which is really saying: Christ has made you holy; and then the command comes: You are called to be holy. So this is who you are. You are holy in Jesus Christ, now live it out.

DAVE BAST

Yes, be what you are.

BOB HEERSPINK

Demonstrate that essence that you now have in Jesus Christ, this new life, by the way you live.

DAVE BAST

So now it is time to talk about holiness as moral behavior – as the things that we actually say and do – the character that we develop in ourselves as the people of God – as the body of Christ; and we need to probe a little bit more deeply at that, too, because I think for a lot of us to suggest the idea of being holy somehow implies sort of decency or middle class morality or you don't do this or you don't do that. It reminds me of a line from my father's generation. I don't think it was ever said seriously, but Christians used to repeat: We don't smoke and we don't chew and we don't go with those who do. So, there are certain behaviors...

BOB HEERSPINK

Yes, there is this notion... yes, there is this notion in North America that if you live just a decent, middle class life you have lived a Christian life. There is this notion in North America that to live a decent, middle class life is all it takes to live a Christian life; and that is just nonsense. When you really look to scripture and you discover that that holiness essentially is put on display in Jesus Christ. If you want to identify *the* Holy One, it is Jesus; and our holiness is rooted in him. So if we are going to live out our holiness, we need to take a look at what holy living would be as we seek to be Christ-like.

DAVE BAST

Authentic holiness is mind-blowing, really. It is an awesome thing. Think of the impact that Christ had on those around him. He was always astonishing them because sometimes he sort of broke their rules or ignored them or... and at other times they were almost terrified in his presence because there was, you know... he just came from another world, and he lived a different kind of life, and that is the life of holiness that we are called to; a life of radical love, of unfathomable grace, a kind of purity that is almost independent of our surroundings or our circumstances, something we carry inside us.

BOB HEERSPINK

Well, you know, Jesus did not look around at his neighbor and say: What are they thinking of me? Am I conforming to what my fellow Pharisaical teacher is thinking? He broke apart those cultural mores because said: For me, I have come to do the will of my Father. That is the core of what it means for me, says Jesus, to live a holy life. And it is the same thing for us today. You know, for us to look at the will of God, for even our personal calling that comes to each of us as to what God wants us to be and do in the world, and say that is what I need to be about; and that may mean that we are going to be out of center – we are going to be out of the mainstream – because what we are doing is focused in a radical obedience to our God.

DAVE BAST

Just imagine what our churches would be like – our local congregations – if we lived that radical life of Jesus; the love and the grace and the purity, frankly, that he displayed. You know, I was talking to a seminary student the other day who was preparing to be a pastor, and I asked: Why does church matter to you? We are talking about the Church in this whole series, why does it matter? And this is the answer: Church matters because God doesn't want us to go through life alone. God knows we need each other, we need community; instead we gather as separated islands in a building, hiding behind our clothes, our makeup, our masks. Church matters because at some point it is going to be a place where being me is okay. I think that is a really cool understanding of grace: Accepting people and saying: Being you is okay; but you also need to be transformed. Come and join us; let's be part of this holiness project.

BOB HEERSPINK

Because the holiness project isn't just an individual work that God is carrying out in individual lives. It is a holiness that we achieve together as the body of Christ.

DAVE BAST

Well, thanks for joining our *Groundwork* conversation, and don't forget it is listeners like you asking questions and participating that keep our topics relevant to your life. So tell us what you think about what you are hearing and suggest topics or passages you would like to hear on future *Groundwork* programs. Visit us at groundworkonline.com and join the conversation.

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