

**SERMON: Worldliness vs Holiness Isaiah 58.9b-14; Ps 103.1-8; Hebrews 12.14-29; Luke 13.10-17**

Dear Father, as we wade through the murkiness of this world, may we seek to follow your way only. Grant us the strength and wisdom to run your race till our last breath. Amen

From a faith perspective the concept of “worldliness” is a challenging one. Over the centuries what it has meant within different Christian communities has varied considerably. The Puritans in 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> century England and early America had a very strict code of conduct. Pointless enjoyment was frowned upon, and as a result many theatres, inns and places for recreation were closed down. Most sports were banned altogether – if fact, anyone caught playing football on a Sunday would be whipped as punishment. Imagine what would happen if we tried to impose that code today! Jumping forward to the 20<sup>th</sup> century, my own mother grew up in a strict Methodist household, where alcohol, smoking, dancing and gambling in any form, were all prohibited. Her response was to marry into Catholicism which didn’t have any of those restrictions.

All this leads me to question: What does worldliness mean for us today? (invite responses)

The Bible Gateway website puts it this way: *Worldliness, as defined in Scripture, comprises a set of values, practices, and attitudes that oppose God’s revealed will. It draws hearts and minds away from divine priorities, manifesting in cravings of the flesh, lust of the eyes, and the pride of life. Scripture consistently underscores the conflict between living for God and conforming to the world-an opposition that affects every dimension of human experience.*

Living for God leads us reflect on the concept of holiness. What does holiness mean for us? (invite responses)

The Bible Hub website explains holiness like this: *Holiness, in the biblical context, refers to the state of being set apart, sacred, or consecrated to God. The Hebrew word for holiness is "qodesh," and the Greek equivalent is "hagios." Both terms convey the idea of separation from the common or profane and dedication to the divine. Holiness, therefore, is not merely an abstract concept but a practical and essential aspect of the Christian life, rooted in the character of God and manifested in the lives of His people.*

So let us explore our readings to see what insight we can gain on this important issue of: “How can we live holy lives”?

### **God's Holiness: Psalm 103. 1-8**

Verse 1 of Psalm 103 tells us to “Bless the Lord, O my soul, and all that is within me, bless his holy name.” The holiness of God is intrinsic and absolute. It is a defining attribute of His character, setting Him apart from all creation. Through His holiness He provides to us, His creation, essential, life-giving benefits. Verses 2 to 8 list some of these benefits:

- He forgives our iniquities,
- He heals our diseases,
- He redeems us from eternal death in the Pit, instead granting us eternal life,
- He crowns us with steadfast love and mercy,
- He satisfies us with goodness and
- He vindicates and gives justice to the oppressed.

Who does this remind you of? Yes, Jesus Christ, as the divine Son of God, embodies this holiness. His life on earth was a perfect example of holiness in action. Hebrews 7.26 describes Him as "holy, innocent, undefiled, set apart from sinners, and exalted above the heavens." Through His sacrificial death and resurrection, believers are made holy and are called to live in His likeness. Unfortunately, this doesn't mean that we lead pure lives all the time, untainted by temptations. We each know our own weaknesses, where we are drawn to the things of this world away from our Lord. However, that doesn't stop us from striving to live the example of a holy life set by Jesus. This call to holiness is repeated often in the New Testament, as seen in 1 Peter 1:15-16: *"But just as He who called you is holy, so be holy in all you do, for it is written: 'Be holy, because I am holy.'"*

### **Isaiah 58.9b-14**

Verses 9b-14 of Isaiah 58 explain to us some of the ways in which we can put into practice being holy and through our actions find our joy in the Lord. Those actions include when:

- we remove the yoke from among us by dealing with injustice and oppression,
- we stop pointing the finger and speaking evil about others,
- we offer our food to the hungry and satisfy the needs of the afflicted and
- we honour the Sabbath by putting aside our own interests, instead delighting in the holy day of the Lord.

## **Luke 13.10-17**

This direction to honour the Sabbath leads us to our gospel reading from Luke 13.10-17. Here we find Jesus displaying His holiness by healing a woman who had been severely crippled for 18 years. But because He dared to do it on the Sabbath the leader of the Synagogue rebuked Jesus and the woman, telling the crowds in verse 14: *“There are six days on which work ought to be done; come on those days and be cured and not on the Sabbath.”*

Jesus’ response is very clear. He calls the synagogue leaders hypocrites for interpreting the Law legalistically. The Sadducees and Pharisees had defined work microscopically, down to the smallest facet of their daily lives – and every minute act so defined was strictly prohibited on the Sabbath. The Law given to Israel was a means to teach holiness, setting the Israelites apart from other nations. But their interpretation of the Law fell into the realm of worldliness because it neglected the key element of God’s holiness – His love for His creation. Jesus demonstrates His holiness by expressing God’s love for this crippled woman through healing her- Sabbath or no Sabbath. Little wonder that His opponents were put to shame by His words and action and the crowds rejoiced!

## **Hebrews 12. 14-29**

This comparison between worldliness and God’s holiness as shown by Christ is a key element within our Hebrews reading. It points to some of the ways which will help us to pursue personal holiness as a response to God's grace given to us through Jesus.

First, we are urged to pursue peace. As Swindoll says: *“in our world rocked by constant conflict...and open warfare, the pursuit of peace seems an impossible task...Worldliness says, ‘Kill or be killed’. But God’s system in Romans 12.18 says, ‘If possible, so far as it depends on you, be at peace with all men.’ What a contrast!”*

Second, we are warned in verse 15: *“Don’t let anyone come short of grace.”* Christians operate in the realm of grace- the free gift of forgiveness and eternal salvation. When we model that gracious forgiveness in our lives and share it with others we are rejecting the rigid application of legalism, we walk away from the influence of worldly hard-hearted principles and move towards God’s loving holiness.

Third, we are also warned in verse 15: *“Don’t allow bitterness to take root.”* There is perhaps nothing more destructive within the body of Christ than the seed of bitterness being planted in its midst. No wonder that Isaiah tells us to

stop pointing the finger and speaking evil of others. Yet when we graciously forgive one another our failings and support each other in acts of repentance and healing that seed cannot grow.

Fourth, we are urged in verse 16: *‘Don’t become like Esau, an immoral and godless person, who sold his birthright for a single meal’* This is a strong reminder that when we value temporary earthly desires we are turning away from God’s holiness. Followers of Jesus are called to live for eternity rather than today, for God’s kingdom rather than this world. As Swindoll states: *“The message to us is clear: Don’t trade your priceless spiritual inheritance for the paltry wares of this world!”*

All of these important instructions culminate in verses 18 to 29. Here we are given two distinct images. Mount Sinai represents the Law and all the fear and trembling that came with this Old Covenant. By sharp contrast Mount Zion depicts the New Covenant. Believers both then and now, are encouraged in verse 22 by remembering that we have: *“come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem...”* Through the blood of Jesus, He is the mediator of the new covenant, where we can experience the personal, loving presence of our living and Holy God. This truth leads to the final instruction on how to achieve the goal of our own holiness. Verses 25 to 29 urge us to listen to Jesus’ message and to offer reverent and thankful worship to God for His promised kingdom.

Imbued within all of Hebrew 12 is the acknowledgement that the journey away from worldliness towards holiness is a marathon race, which requires great perseverance from all involved in running it. So, to conclude, Swindoll offers some sound advice on how we can be successful in seeing it through to our last breath:

- slow down to conserve your energy for the long haul over the rough terrain of life’s challenges
- take time to learn from your fellow marathon team members, both the saints of old and those running beside you. They may well have faced the same challenges as yourself
- Reach out a hand of support to anyone who stumbles along the way, remembering that we are not in a competition for God’s kingdom – it is freely given to everyone
- And most importantly no matter what we face during our long race, never cease to humbly accept the grace of our Lord Jesus. May we ceaselessly worship and praise our Holy God in gratitude and thanksgiving. AMEN