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Holiness

Word of Life for the Church and for the World
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PARTICIPANT'S GUIDE

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Kadosh קדוש and ἅγιος

Holiness is a state of purity and moral integrity that is an essential attribute of the triune God (Is. 6:3). Through the gift of sanctification in Jesus Christ, the Holy Spirit calls God's people to be saints, to be holy people (1 Cor. 1:2; Gal. 3:1–5). Nine times in Ephesians, St. Paul refers to the people of God as saints, as holy people.

When we think of holiness, two things stand out. First, this gift must ever and always be *extra nos*. It comes from *outside of us*. The holiness of Adam and Eve came from outside themselves as perfect creations of a holy God. Having forfeited that holiness in sin, they had no holiness of their own and no means to regain or gain it for themselves. As their descendants, no one born of the flesh has any holiness. It must forever come from outside ourselves as a *gift* from God (James 1:17). The Holy Son of God perfectly obeyed the Law of God for us to pave the way for the reception of this gospel gift (Matt. 1:17). As the sole mediator between God and man, Jesus is the one who makes this *gift* possible (1 Tim. 2:5; Heb. 2:11). The Father is the author of this *gift*. Jesus is the agent of this *gift*. The Holy Spirit is the administrator of this *gift* (Eph. 1:3–14).

Second, the *gift* of holiness is a *gift* we have already and one that we continually receive. As people who are at the same time sinner and saint, it is part of the “now, not yet” tension in which we live. Through Jesus’ means of grace, the Lord of the Church bestows this gift upon His redeemed. Our need constantly to receive this gift of God is born of the fact that we are unable to manage the gift of holiness ourselves because our sinful nature is still with us, tainting and working against God’s gift. Daily we sin much, forfeiting this holi-

ness for the sake of sin and always standing in the need of the forgiveness of sins, by which we are renewed in this gift of holiness.

Through Holy Baptism, the Holy Son of God *clothes* us with holiness (Gal. 3:26–29). Through Holy Communion, the sinless Son of God renews us with holiness through the gift of forgiveness of sins (Matt. 26:28). Through Holy Absolution, the risen Savior *breathes* on His disciples His Holy Spirit (John 20:21–23). Finally, through the preaching of the Gospel, the Savior *unleashes* His saving power for justification, sanctification and restoration (Rom. 1:16).

In this study, we will, with the help of the Holy Spirit, ponder this *gift* and how it comes to us through Jesus Christ in time and space by grace! It is a gift that sets us apart for living and leading a life filled with hope because Christ has saved us, even though every day we still experience our sinful flesh, by nature a wretched and unholy sinner, that will be with us until we die (Rom. 7:14–25). Receiving His gift of holiness, we also receive from God a clearer picture of what true love looks like. Like love, holiness binds together all God’s gifts and attributes.

Growing up in Israel, our neighborhood was filled with synagogues. Often on the entrance of these synagogues, they would have these words inscribed: קדוש קדוש קדוש ה' הוֹאֲבֵר “Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts” (Is. 6:3). Thus a person entering this place knew he was stepping unto sacred soil, holy grounds. They were coming into the presence of the Holy God of Israel — the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the God of the living and not the dead.

SCRIPTURAL BASIS

The sacred Scriptures testify to God’s holiness on so many different levels. Moses, in the book of Leviticus, highlights the holiness of God: “For I am the Lord your God. Consecrate yourselves therefore, and be holy, for I am holy. You shall not defile yourselves with any swarming thing that crawls on the ground” (Lev. 11:44).

In Ex. 3:4, the Lord God tells Moses “Take your sandals off your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground” (Ex. 3:5).

Our Lord and Savior, Jesus, in His Sermon on the Mount, said: “You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect” (Matt. 5:48).

1. What is holiness?
2. What is the distinction between sacred (holy) and secular (impure)?

3. We humans are not “holy” nor do we have “holiness” of our own.
4. What is it that makes us humans covered in His holiness?

Holiness apart from Christ is dangerous to us. When the unholy comes in contact with the holy, it ceases to exist. But in Christ, things are different. In Christ, holiness is communicable. Holiness is passed from God to us when we are touched by the Word in the waters of Holy Baptism. We receive the Holy Spirit and are made holy. As in life, we are what we eat. When we ingest that which is holy in the Holy Supper of our Lord, Christ’s body and blood under bread and wine, we become holy as well. In neither case is holiness a creation of ours or about our effort. It is not a state that we can attain. It is always about Jesus and what He does for us.

Dr. Luther in his large catechism stated: “Where God’s name is, there must be life and salvation [Psalm 54:1]. So Baptism may certainly be called a divine, blessed, fruitful and gracious water” (Large Catechism IV 26–27). In this new life we become holy as we are dressed in the garments of holiness.

Furthermore Luther states: “*Christian holiness is not active; it is passive... You and I are holy, the church, city, and people are holy, not by their own but by an alien holiness, not by active but by passive holiness, because they have divine and holy things, to wit, the ministry, the Gospel, Baptism, through which they are made holy*” (What Luther Says, CPH, p. 657).

Our ears are made holy by way of the *extra nos* as we hear the majestic call of the Lord Himself in the proclamation of His name. It sounds much like those to whom holiness has been imparted in Divine Worship. We dare not take it lightly. It is our fondest dream, our delight, our destiny in Christ to sing of, to, with and about His Holiness! Now we understand why not all worship is acceptable.

The root meaning of “holiness” (השודק) is “separate.” The Hebrew verb “to be holy” (שודק) first appears in the establishment of the Sabbath as a distinct day from the previous six days. Gen 2:3 states, “God blessed the seventh day and hallowed it” (וַהֲבִיחַ אֱלֹהִים). (Study “Priesthood in the Pentateuch.”) Indeed, God blessed the seventh day, the worship day, the rest day and put in it the capacity to receive and sustain increase from Him, holiness.

Dr. John Kleinig shares his teacher Herman Sasse’s words: “The holy things of God were for the holy people of God.”¹

Kleinig adds: “Gerhard von Rad taught me that God’s holiness was a life-giving, life-sustaining power that was opposed to the deadly power of impurity. Holiness was communicated by physical contact with the holy things at the sanctuary.”²

God had instituted the Divine Service to share His holiness with Israel and the Church.

Kleinig paints a beautiful picture of this holy God who loves “His Treasure Possessions” הַלְלָהּ יְיָ אֱלֹהֵינוּ and wanted to bless His people with this same holiness stating: “God did not keep his holiness to himself, nor did he use it to distance himself from his sinful people. Instead, he joined them on their earthly journey so that he could share his holiness with them. They didn’t sanctify themselves; he sanctified them. He made and kept them holy. They drew their holiness from him, and him only.”³

The Holy One makes and keeps us holy! In time Χρόνος and eternity καιρός. A holiness that occurs in one without the other is counterfeit.

C. S. Lewis helps us with understanding the holiness of God better in this brief paragraph.

“In Isaiah 6:1-8, we see Isaiah’s vision of God in the temple. He sees the Lord “sitting on a throne lofty and exalted” (vs. 1). Seraphim surround Him calling to each other, “Holy, Holy, Holy, is the Lord of hosts, the whole earth is full of his glory” (vs. 3). This triple repetition of a divine attribute is without parallel in the rest of the Bible. Scripture never says that God is “justice, justice, justice” or even “love, love, love,” but it does say that He is “holy, holy, holy.” The Hebrew does not have a grammatical way to express the comparative or the superlative (i.e., holier or holiest). The way it stresses the importance of something is by repetition.” (from the Fall 2008 issue of Knowing and Doing: cslewisinstitute.org/The_Holiness_of_God_FullArticle)

It is impossible for us to understand the holiness of God on our own, because we are impure, not dedicated and unholy. Our finite minds can’t grasp or fathom something that sacred, something that would send Isaiah shivering and trembling with awe and fear, as He stands in the presence of the Holy God. However, the Holy Spirit opens our eyes and helps our feeble minds to get a glimpse of this, as we come in contact with the Holy things.

¹ Kleinig, John W., Concordia Commentary, A Theological Exposition of Sacred Scripture Leviticus. St. Louis: CPH, 2003, p. XIV.

² Ibid, p XIV.

³ Ibid., p 10.

CONFESSIONAL USE OF THE WORD HOLINESS

According to Kenneth E. Larson's *Concordance to the Book of Concord* (NPH, 1989), there are only 26 references to the word "holiness" in the Confessions (p. 256). Of these most are talking of the false holiness of the errorists. But hidden within all of this, two gems revealed themselves. In the Large Catechism, in the discussion on the Creed, in the third article, paragraphs 47–59 speak of the holiness of the holy Christian Church, the importance of the imputed holiness that comes to the Church through her means (see in particular par. 54–59) as the office and work of the Holy Spirit: to sanctify, to make one holy. In the Large Catechism, paragraphs 47–59 in the discussion on the Creed, the third article, speak of that holiness.

Then again, in the Large Catechism, on Holy Baptism (fourth chief part), right before going into the beautiful discussion on infant Baptism, Luther summarizes what the threefold gifts of forgiveness of sins, eternal life and salvation mean as they are poured over us in the 44–46th paragraphs.

We may also stay with the Large Catechism and turn to the Sacrament of the Altar wherein the benefits of what it means to be nourished and brought to new birth and the new life are good, even though the word "holiness" is not found here.⁴

The definition of the church in AP VII–VIII: "Therefore in accordance with the Scripture we maintain that the church is, properly speaking, the assembly of the saints who truly believe the gospel of Christ and have the Holy Spirit."⁵ This opens the discussion up to what the Church is as the holy ones, yes, those who do indeed receive the holy things.

TEACHING/PREACHING

What is precious about God making us holy (incarnationally, sacramentally, scripturally imparting His holiness) is that this is not a onetime event, but our triune God's continuous activity. He works through His means of grace to make us holy. Every time our hearts, ears and lips are touched by His Word and Sacrament we become holy unto the Lord, set apart to do good works (Eph. 2:10). That is the great blessings we have as we enter His holy place. We stand on sacred ground. In this place, the holiness of God continuously touches, purifies and sets apart those who are drawn

into the worship to be holy, forgiven of our sins. Those who come to the Divine Service are declared as clean as was Isaiah when the coal from the altar of God touched his formerly unclean lips.

1. At what point is this "holiness" connected in the Divine Service?
2. How can the pastor help his saints grasp the magnitude of God's holiness?

⁴ Kolb, Robert, Wengert, Timothy J, *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*. (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2000), para. 23–27, p. 469

⁵ Ibid., para. 28, p. 178

DISCUSSION

1. In relation to the imparting of the Holy One and the giving of His true body and blood for us (the holy things for the holy ones), how does this understanding of “holiness” work with our understanding of close(d) Communion?

By that we mean: If this is the *sacred* place and time, and these are the gifts of God, then how does this impact our welcoming to His holy table those who may not be properly prepared and/or those of another confession?

2. If the means of grace are indeed His means to make us and keep us holy, and these are found in the Divine Service, then how does that affect the criteria by which we evaluate liturgical innovations in the forms we use for the Divine Service?

These are but two examples, and many more could be used by the pastor with his people to show them that the holy life is fed and nourished, yes, even birthed, within the Divine Service by the thrice-hagion God of Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

3. The holiness that is outside us is from heaven above. In the Divine Service, the One who is Holy gives His holiness, His full and free forgiveness, eternal life and salvation.

How might the pastor use the various parts of the common liturgy of the Divine Service (e.g., the Gloria in Excelsis, the Offertory, the Sanctus) to teach his people that the holy life is fed and nourished, yes, even birthed, in and through the Divine Service by the thrice-holy God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit?

Further Discussion Questions:

1. First, holiness is not a concept or a thing. How does this help to understand Isaiah’s frequent reference to God as “the Holy one of Israel”? What does this mean as a foundation for the total message of Isaiah? How does Hosea 11:9 help in understanding holiness?
2. What is the difference between “holiness” and “glory”?
3. How can anyone tell what holiness is?
4. How many categories are there in the Bible: most holy, holy, sacred, revered, profane, clean, unclean, secular — Old Testament? New Testament?
5. How can we “keep something holy”?
6. Are there holy time, holy space, holy things? Are there degrees of holiness? Are some things holier than other things or people?
7. After conversion/Baptism, we are at one and the same time saint and sinner (*simul Justus et peccator*), condemned by the Law of God, but fully redeemed in Christ, covered with His righteousness. How does holiness relate to sanctification? How does the Old Testament and New Testament define sanctification? How is it that Leviticus says both that God sanctifies you and that you are to “sanctify yourselves”?

SUMMARY

Ultimately what God desires for us, His treasured possession, is to continue to remain holy. To help us remain in this state, He wants us to continue to be in contact with the holy things. The place to connect is then to be in His presence, in His temple, around His holy Word and Holy Sacraments. For this reason, worship life is beneficial, a blessing and beautiful thing for us. Here we receive the life-sustaining and life-strengthening gifts.

From His Word flows into our ears the forgiveness of sins, and from His pierced hands we receive His precious body and blood into our mouths. With love in His heart and holes in His hands, He offers us His holy things.

What a blessed people we are to belong to such a loving and holy God. Peter helps us appreciate what God has done for us: “But 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. Once you were not a people, but now you are God’s people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy” (1 Peter 2:9–10).

Holiness is ours because of His holy things. Thanks be to God that He has made us holy in the death and resurrection of His Son, Who covers us with His garments of salvation and His robes of righteousness.