



01. DISCIPLESHIP

EXERPT FROM 'DIFFERENT' - CHAPTER 1

HOLINESS REVISITED

At least at the time of writing, we find there is precious little currently being written and read about holiness. An n-gram view of the word's usage in the history of modern literature shows a steep and steady decline at the turn of the 20th century with virtually no change to today. It simply isn't a popular word in our contemporary lexicon. Even in Christian circles, it doesn't seem like a contemporary missional or ecclesial concept. Still, holiness, so paramount to the description of God, and in turn, so crucial to the identification of the people of God, is a necessary biblical concept. Jesus said we ought to be holy, in the same way that the Father is holy.⁹ Presumably in the same way that he was holy. In essence, what is holiness if not positive difference? The invitation to be different then is an invitation to holiness. It is an invitation to discover the character and nature of God and then to try and imitate that character both in our own lives and the constitution of our collective lives together.

Holiness has come to mean a kind of pedantic legalism (not drinking or smoking), yet those distinctions were nevertheless an attempt to set the people of God apart from the rest of the world. We applaud that impulse, if not the application. In fact, with the growing movement of young Christians rediscovering mission, this impulse has become indispensable again. Without incarnation and real relationship with the unbelieving world, there can be no mission. Amen. But without holiness there can be no effect to the mission we do.

We may be learning again to be missional (and our communities are at the vanguard in this regard), but it does not mean that the mission we do is actually working. We have learned to move back into the inner city, find the third places, recapture the workplace as a legitimate

mission context, and rightly redefine the missionary to be any follower of Jesus, not just paid clergy, but it does not mean that our missionary work is actually effective. We should ask, has our relocation and recalibration to mission actually had any effect?

So many of our friends are motivated by the idea of church planting, but if the churches we plant do not transform the places we plant them, how is that an ultimate goal? Planting churches is fine if what is planted brings the kingdom of God and its righteousness with it.

We can say, being very close to this movement, that it is not enough to inhabit (incarnate) the pub if there is no visible and audible witness, and even more poignantly, if there is no discernible holiness of the witness herself.

Given the recent history of the church moving away from mission and embracing the teaching and pastoral gifts while neglecting the apostolic, prophetic, and evangelistic ones, it is not hard to see why we cheer and celebrate as heroes those among us who have “pitched their tents” alongside the lost and the poor. We are a part of that groundswell toward incarnation and mission, but that simply is not enough. It is like we are cheering on the team for putting on their uniforms. I suppose, being out of the game so long, it might give some cause for celebration, but it does not mean that we’ve even begun to play, and it certainly doesn't mean that we’ve won.

Although it might still seem like a new message for some, we are 10 years into that truth, and we grow tired of the church cheering for people who “step out” or “take a risk.” That is the first step, but a decade of stepping out and taking risks has left us wanting more. In that initial rediscovery, there is the sense that ministry is adventure, but a decade later we are beginning to understand that ministry is more like art. It might be an adventure to paint your first portrait or write your first poem, but after years of painting and writing you begin to chase proficiency, dreaming for a masterpiece.

Holiness is the biblical concept we chase. To be different in the way that God is different. Not to be transcendent, but to embody transcendence. To live in a way that boggles the minds of onlookers, that provokes the soul to jealousy, and that fascinates the heart. We want to identify what sets us apart and how to be truly holy.

We want to identify what it looks, smells, feels, and tastes like to be holy. We have written this book to respond to 12 provocative questions posed in Scripture. They are questions that invite us to consider our relationship with God and in turn, our relationship with the world we live in. They are questions with implications for every individual Christian and the churches we form together. We mean for this book to be a survey of what we believe, values for a relevant and potent contextualization of the church in our time. Still, there are plenty of things missing. While these 12 themes represent critical issues for us to understand and embody, that does not mean that other biblical themes are somehow less important. These are simply the questions we believe most need to be asked (and answered) right now, and it is our heartfelt conviction that Christians who can live in the biblical call that these themes unearth will change the world.

SPIRITUAL STOCKHOLM SYNDROME

In August 1973, a bank was robbed in Stockholm, Sweden, resulting in a six-day hostage crisis. Several bank employees were held in the vault as their captors found themselves in a stand-off with police. What is both remarkable and memorable about this robbery was the reaction of the hostages. The captives spent so much time in the orbit of these robbers they became emotionally attached to them, becoming more and more sympathetic to their cause. Refusing help from the police, the victims actually defended their captors when the ordeal was over. They had come to see the criminals as their friends and their saviors as their enemies. From this episode the term Stockholm Syndrome was coined to refer to the phenomenon of captives sympathizing and even taking the side of their kidnappers.

We all suffer from a kind of spiritual Stockholm Syndrome. Our sympathy is given to whoever is closest to us. When that is Jesus, we are freed to live a life of loving protest against the things and people that would enslave us. However, when we are closer to our captors than we are to Jesus, we begin to sympathize with them, their rationale, and their motivations. We are captives but begin to forget that we are. We begin to love the world that hates us and hate the God who loves us. We get it all backwards.

Maybe we have to love our world by saying no to it, by walking away, by calling it to account, and by offering it a prophetic challenge. We forgive because we first recognize that something

is sin. We believe in redemption because we believe in judgment. We can offer mercy because we, of all the people in the earth, understand justice. But this is only possible if we are more deeply connected to Jesus than we are to our context, when we are loved more by Jesus than by the world. When the church has come to that conviction it has often (erroneously) concluded that it must therefore withdraw from the world in order to deny its influence. Declining participation in something doesn't lessen its influence; in many cases, it only deepens it. Just ask the desert Fathers, whose retreat to the wilderness was most often characterized not with intimacy with God but with an encounter with the Devil. The desert is not the answer for holiness, and it is certainly not the answer for mission. We have to search for a middle ground in delivering a holy life in the midst of the world we live in. We have to find a way to contextualize holiness.

NEW HOLINESS

Clearly, the word doesn't make the list of Christianity's most popular terms these days. That's because we forgot what it means. But we need our word back and these chapters are an effort to recapture the raw beauty and untamed power of this thing we call holiness.

The word itself carries the thought of being separated from one thing... and set apart for some other thing. For God. For a unique purpose. Holy. Different. Consider that word, and just how hard it can be to embody.

Ever since the Fall, humans have had this desire to fit, to belong, to be on the inside of some cosmic location that we can't quite put our finger on. We just know we're on the outside, and nobody wants to be alienated.

I (Mike) remember this feeling as a child when our family moved, and I was forced into a new school. I'm not sure if it had more to do with beginning middle school or the realization that my classmates were more affluent than we were, but I soon felt the pressure to line up my modest wardrobe with the designer wardrobes of the kids around me. I recall wishing we had the money to afford a new pair of Levi's jeans but settling for one of those discounted outlets where you can buy a "slightly defective" product. Maybe you've noticed the orange tag on the back of a pair of Levi's. In order to clarify the reject status of the jeans, the outlets tore off the

orange tag. Not to be out-smarted, I found a pair of old (legitimate) Levi's, cut out the precious orange tag, then proceeded to sew it onto the cheaper pair I had bought.

It's an embarrassing memory, but we could fill this book with a host of other, darker stories of the ways we humans try to patch together some sort of "righteousness" to get us on the "inside" of some location we can't put our finger on.

"You are different." That comment can be taken two very different ways. When we are kids in the schoolyard, it is the phrase we most fear. At some base level, we need to fit in, and any difference, any oddity, has to be tucked in or tapered off if we expect to survive socially. To be seen as different is to be seen with disdain. Later in life, when people are tired of fitting in, when everyone has at some point wrestled with their own existential loneliness, those same words can be the height of flattery.

Here is the difficulty: we are hard-wired to become someone significant and make a difference. The fact is, we can't shake this internal craving to matter. It's part of being crafted in the image of God.

When we want to fit in with the masses, we have an implicit trust in the system or social structure we opt into. Years later when we want to be different it is because we have lost faith in that system or those people or at least grown bored with it.

(if you enjoyed this excerpt, consider purchasing the book and read the entire chapter)