

Keynote Address

I'm delighted to be a part of this retreat experience. There are many reasons why we need a renewed emphasis on holiness today. Not the least of which is the reality that many Christians are unaware of their need for holiness. They have so frequently suppressed the overtures of the Spirit, wooing them towards a life of holiness that their spiritual senses have fallen into a deep sleep of complacency and neglect.

Even though The Salvation Army is a holiness movement, in many places we have become apathetic about holiness and the danger of this spiritual condition needs to be brought to our attention. We don't see the sin in our thoughts, feelings and actions and we are not aware of our inability to change in these areas. That kind of inward transformation can only come through the person and work of the Holy Spirit. It is my prayer that this weekend will not only be an enlightening and spiritually powerful weekend for you but that you will become an ambassador for holiness committed to awakening others to their spiritual apathy and lack of holiness.

The good news of the gospel is that we can be transformed by the Holy Spirit to the extent that our love for God and our love for one another can become a "natural response." We can take on the disposition of Christ and live out that mindset in our everyday lives. To deny this possibility is to deny that God is capable of doing what he's promised which in turn is to say that sin is stronger than grace.

The doctrine of holiness, especially entire sanctification, has become a rather confusing and therefore neglected subject in many Army pulpits. We know the jargon, the Christianese, but

somewhere along the way I fear we have lost its application. That's rather sad because we need the principles and concepts that are so much a part of this doctrine to be evidenced in our daily lives. Now I've been tasked with preaching holiness this weekend. But let me say up front that I will not be preaching about the biblical, historical or theological roots of our doctrine of holiness. That's covered in our doctrine book, Brengle's writings and the 11 I Believes of our Soldier's Covenant. That's something I love and cherish but it's not my focus for this weekend. I will be focusing instead on the very practical implications of holiness which are summarized in the often neglected 10 I wills of the Soldier's Covenant.

Brengle identifies a number of reasons why we don't take holiness seriously enough.

One of those reasons is that we don't understand the scope of what it means to be holy. Holiness is a matter of head, heart, hand and habits. It affects our attitudes, what we think, it affects our affections, what we feel, it affects our actions or what we do from day to day and it affects the habits we maintain.

That's going to be the focus of what I will preach this weekend. Holiness of Head, Heart, and Hand; attitudes, affections and actions.

Frederick Buechner gives us the following illustration: "In the movie, *Beauty and the Beast*, it's only when the Beast discovers that Beauty really loves him even in his ugliness that he himself becomes beautiful. In the experience of Saint Paul it's only when we discover that God really loves us in all our unloveliness that we ourselves start to become Christ-like."

Paul's word for this gradual transformation of a sow's ear into a silk purse, as Frederick Buechner calls it, is sanctification and Paul sees it as the second stage in the process of salvation.

Buechner continues, “Being sanctified is an ongoing and sometimes painful process because with part of ourselves we prefer our sin, just as part of the Beast prefers his glistening snout and curved tusks. There are those who don’t even bother trying to be holy and even those who remain committed to the process often drag their feet most of the way.”

What is holiness? It is Christlikeness, empowered by the Holy Spirit who is God’s gift to us at conversion. Holiness is nothing less than conformity to the character of God as revealed to us in the person of Jesus Christ.

I think it was Ironside who used a nautical analogy to remind us that our salvation involves three tenses.

I was saved when I accepted Jesus Christ as my Lord and Savior, just as surely as a man rescued at sea can legitimately say, “I was saved when they pulled me over the gunnels.” But as the motor boat puts its way to the safety of the wharf, can he not legitimately also say, “I am being saved?” Can holiness not be seen as the present tense of our salvation as well? Are we not on our way to the heavenly shore? And what will happen when the boat finally reaches the safety of the wharf, is not the rescued man anticipating that time when his feet finally touches dry land, is he not sensing, “I will be saved?” And what of the Christian, saved in the past, living a holy life in the present, will he not be finally saved when he looks into the face of his Savior and in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, is changed from glory to glory? Justification, Sanctification, Glorification. I was saved, I am being saved, I will be saved. Holiness is the here and now of our salvation experience.

A second reason we don’t take holiness as seriously as we should is because of a lack of understanding about grace. Grace is the most beautiful yet perhaps least understood word in our religious vocabulary. Lynette and I have just spent a whole week leading a retreat with a group of seniors which we called All About Grace. It’s no more possible to live the holy life without complete dependence on grace than it is to experience salvation from sin except by the grace of God revealed in Jesus Christ. Throughout this weekend you will hear a great deal about grace.

John wrote that Jesus was “full of grace and truth” and that “from his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace” (John 1:14, 16). I remember sitting in our dining room in Chance Cove, Newfoundland during a winter storm. From our dining room window I could watch the waves crashing onto the beach just a hundred yards away. It’s a perfect picture of grace, like the waves of the ocean, one after another, crashing onto the beach. One wave has barely retreated when another comes crashing over the stones. They just keep coming and coming from the unending source of the North Atlantic Ocean. And so it is with the grace of God through Jesus Christ. There’s not just one or two waves to wash away my sin, but wave after wave from the unlimited fullness of Jesus Christ.

Can I live the holy life? There is grace enough for this!

If we have an understanding and appreciation for the grace of God in Jesus Christ, we know that it is he who lives his life through mine and not me by my self-effort or legalistic lifestyle creating a form of Christlikeness in my everyday life. It is all about grace, this life of holiness.

Another reason for our failure to live the holy life is because we don’t take sin seriously. And the reason we don’t take sin seriously is because our attitude toward sin is more self-centered than God-centered. W. S. Plummer said, “We never see sin aright until we see it as against God.” Pharaoh and Balaam, Saul and Judas, all said, “I have sinned.” The Prodigal said, “I have sinned against heaven and before thee” and David said, “Against thee, thee only have I sinned.” We need to know that our sin breaks the heart of God.

Many years ago Carl Mininger wrote a classic book entitled “Whatever Became of Sin?” We’ve done a great job of glossing it over haven’t we? Even Christian leaders, when caught in the act, will admit, “I’ve had an affair.” In Bermuda they have a neat little phrase for it, “He stepped out.” When was the last time even a penitent preacher admitted, “I’ve committed adultery?” Or, if they’re not married, “I’ve committed fornication.” Sounds so nasty doesn’t it? We have to soften it up, “we made love.” What could be wrong with that? Its fornication if its sex outside of God’s ordained pattern for marriage. And God is against it.

Then of course there is the ranking system we've created. "It was just a little sin." Remember what the scriptures say, it's "the little foxes that ruin the vineyards" (Song of Solomon 2:15). It's our compromise on the little issues that lead to our spiritual downfall.

We cannot put sin into neat little categories if we are to live a life of holiness. God is not honored by such an attitude.

A fourth reason for not experiencing holiness in our everyday life is a failure to recognize our personal responsibility. I said earlier that holiness is not possible without grace. But spiritual formation in Christ is not a passive process. Grace does not make us passive. Grace is God acting in our life to accomplish what we cannot do on our own. It empowers but it does not overpower.

I believe we are responsible to God for our lack of holiness. I recently preached a sermon on Daniel. Have you ever noticed the timing of God's judgment in the story of Belshazzar and the handwriting on the wall? The writing appeared when the king used the vessels from the temple to drink his wine and praise his gods. God revealed his anger at precisely the moment when what was intended to be kept holy was used for sin. The Bible calls *us* God's vessel ([2 Corinthians 4:7](#)). God intends for your life and testimony to be holy. If you fill with sin the vessel God has made sacred with the blood of his own Son and use it for unholy purposes, don't assume that God is not going to be angry.

I don't want to sound trite but grace is the gas that drives the holy life. The gas pedal represents my personal responsibility but the gas, the fuel is God's grace.

I was dead in trespasses and sin before prevenient grace awakened my lifeless spirit, started my spiritual engine, if you wish. Now my tank is full of grace, the gas that can drive a holy life. But even if my tank is full and my engine is running, if I don't press the gas pedal my car doesn't move one foot down the roadway. Remember friends, there's no parking on the highway of holiness. I must cooperate with God and the grace and fills my life. Let's put the pedal to the middle and live grace empowered holy lives.

Paul reminds us that grace has created a dual responsibility for every Christian. One is negative the other positive. Titus 2:11-12: “For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation for all people, training us to” now here comes the negative, “renounce ungodliness and worldly passions, and to” now watch for the positive, “live self-controlled, upright, and godly lives in the present age.” You see it’s a matter of “putting off” and “putting on.” It’s kind of like the blades of a pair of scissors. Just one blade is useless for what a pair of scissors is created to do. The two blades have to work together to be effective. Some Christians are virtually obsessed with “putting off.” They don’t go here, they don’t go there, they don’t do this and they don’t do that. But their lives are boring and joyless. Other Christians are trying to put on compassion, kindness, and love, but they’re behavior is far from Christ like. We need both the putting off of sinful practices and the putting on of Christian virtues and values.

God enables us to do this work of daily putting off and putting on, but God will not do the work for us. We must cooperate with grace. There is not a single reference in Scripture that I am aware of where we are taught to depend on the Holy Spirit without an accompanying exercise of discipline on our part, and so we depend on God but we are also responsible to act. But we do this in total dependence on him who gives us strength. Our part is to trust and work, God’s part is to enable us to do the work. It’s like planting a garden isn’t it. We can plant and water but we cannot make anything grow. Only the Spirit can do that. We must plant and water if we are to grow in holiness, but only the Spirit can change us more and more into the image and likeness of Jesus.

In the next couple of days we want to learn how to have the head, heart, and hand of Christ as we pursue a life of holiness.