

# celebrate holiness

by Florence MacKenzie

I don't know who first coined the term. Certainly, it was one of the kids in the group I used to hang out with when I was about ten years old. "Holy Joe" seemed such an apt description of this guy who never missed an opportunity to talk to people about his Christian faith. To our shame, we were only interested in calling him "Holy Joe" as a form of abuse. Then, as now, holiness often got bad press and conjured up all kinds of ideas in people's minds. What sort of things are we talking about?

## Myths About Holiness

*Holiness is irrelevant for present-day Christians.*

*Holiness is an unattainable ideal.*

*Holiness is all about following a man-made list of do's and don'ts.*

Ever heard any of these statements? Or, more to the point, do you believe any of them? The idea that holiness is irrelevant for present-day Christians suggests that it is something that might have worked quite well for Christians in the past, but is probably a bit too extreme, too serious, and too old-fashioned for our present generation. After all, who wants to be labeled as "over the top" or "out of touch"?

Another view of holiness is that it's remote, largely unattainable, and belongs only to a special few. This sort of perspective perhaps leads many of us to question why we should even care about something that appears so inaccessible.

A third myth, and possibly the most common one, reduces holiness to following a list of man-made do's and don'ts. This counterfeit holiness is known as legalism. While holiness consists of obediently responding to God's principles for living, legalism means religious rules made by people are seen as absolute values. The Bible makes it clear that we are to live pure lives (Phil. 4:8; 1 Tim. 5:22; 1 Jn. 3:3). Therefore, as Christians we need to be very careful about what we allow into our minds. If we're wise, we'll set reasonable boundaries regarding what sort of movies we'll watch, for example. This is a good and responsible thing to do. However, the legalist might reason in the following way: "I might suffer mind pollution if I watch certain movies; therefore, to avoid this, I won't watch any movies at all. In fact, watching movies isn't good for anyone, so no-one, especially Christians, should watch them. Going to movies, therefore, is wrong, as is watching a DVD at home." Legalism fails to take account of the fact that, even if we choose not to watch any movies, we're still in danger of failing to live a pure life if we don't keep a check on our thought life. Legalistic rules often end up obscuring the biblical principles they were intended to uphold; not watching movies becomes the standard rather than obedience to a biblical definition of purity.

Is it any wonder that many Christians have determined to live their lives shunning these types of "holiness"? The problem of rejecting these myths, though, is knowing what to put in their place. Sadly, some Christians have replaced them with thinking and behaving just like everyone else around them. But to perpetuate these myths isn't the answer either! What can we do? Only one thing – we need to go back to what the Bible tells us about holiness. So what *does* the Bible say?

## Biblical Holiness

Whenever we want to emphasize something, we often say it more than once. The same is true in the Bible where we sometimes find Old Testament statements being repeated in the New Testament. In several verses in Leviticus, God says that His people are to be holy because He

is holy. This is taken up again in 1 Pet. 1:16, where God says: "*Be holy, because I am holy.*" As our heavenly Father, He wants His children to display the family likeness, and because holiness is such an integral part of His character, He longs to see it mirrored in our lives. Hebrews 10:10 says, "...we have been made holy through the sacrifice of the body of Jesus Christ once for all." This is known as *positional holiness* – we are holy, not because of our behavior, but because of what Christ has done in paying the penalty for our sins. As Christians we occupy a position that allows us to be called holy. However, this isn't the whole picture. Hebrews 12:14 says, "Make every effort...to be holy; without holiness no one will see the Lord." You see, it's not enough to be content with positional holiness on its own – it really does matter how we live. God wants us to live pure lives according to His standards and these are revealed to us in His Word, the Bible. Our responsibility is to be obedient to biblical principles, not a set of man-made rules and regulations. One of the marks of a true Christian is the desire to live a holy life. This means that, as we battle with sin every day of our lives, we make every effort to become more holy in the way we think, speak, and act. This practical, live-it-out aspect of holiness is known as *progressive holiness* and brings delight to the heart of God.

## Choosing Practical Holiness

Although we'll never be perfect in this life, practical holiness involves living in a way that's pleasing to God because we choose to be obedient to Him. It means being set apart *from* sinful practices while, at the same time, being set apart *for* God. As we take time to be holy, our lives will increasingly reflect the character of Jesus Christ. No one lived a more holy life than Christ did. But how do we do this? It all comes down to choices. Here are some ideas:

- Choose to pray the words of the 19<sup>th</sup> century Scottish preacher, Robert Murray M'Cheyne, "Lord, make me as holy as a pardoned sinner can be made."
- Choose to set reasonable boundaries regarding friendships, entertainment, and general lifestyle habits.
- Choose to build relationships with women you can trust so that you can encourage each other to pursue holiness in specific areas of your lives.
- Choose to view holiness as a liberating lifestyle principle that frees us from the sheer hard work of following man-made rules, and releases us to obey God's commands which are not burdensome to us. It brings us freedom from the guilt that accompanies a lifestyle that is sub-standard because it's below God's standard. Holiness frees us to live a life that gives God the honor He deserves and gives us the joy and fulfilment we desire.

Holiness isn't some irrelevant, unattainable, rule-following concept, but rather something that enriches the life of every Christian who lives it out! We serve a God who loves us more than anyone else ever could, and He desires the best for us. So, when we read in 1 Pet. 1:16 that God commands us to be holy, we know that this is for our own good. As women in ministry, let's overturn stereotypes about holiness and show the world it's something to celebrate! Perhaps this was what "Holy Joe" had in mind all along!