

Holiness in the Church

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[0 : 00] We are the temple of the living God. According to the dictionary, a temple is a building or a sacred place used for religious worship.

! As Christians, perhaps the closest we get to temples are cathedrals. We say that, but we don't really believe it because the Bible tells us different.

There was in the Bible a temple in Jerusalem, but it was only a shadow of a far greater reality. Because God's temple on earth isn't a building at all. There is nothing temple-like about any building, be it a city cathedral or a village church.

Let me redefine what a temple is, far be it from me to contradict the dictionary, but let me redefine what a temple is. A temple is the meeting place between God and human beings.

A temple is where human beings meet God. You don't have to go on a pilgrimage to a temple to meet with God because sacred space is an illusion.

[1 : 14] Some might say they meet God in nature on top of mountains somewhere rather than a city, but it's a man-made illusion. There is no such thing as sacred space.

Temple is the meeting place between God and human beings. The Bible tells us, rather, of three temples. Three temples. The first is that Jesus Christ is the ultimate meeting place between God and human beings.

Jesus Christ is the ultimate meeting place between God and human beings. It's in Jesus Christ, the man, we meet with God because Jesus is both God and man in one person.

Throughout the New Testament, Jesus is presented as the dwelling place of God. It's in and through him we meet with God that we have access to the one true and living God.

The second temple is that the individual Christian is the temple of God. The individual Christian. So in 1 Corinthians 6 verse 19, the apostle asks the question, Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you whom you have from God?

[2 : 31] When a person becomes a Christian, God the Holy Spirit comes to live in them. So in a very real sense, therefore, the person himself or herself becomes the meeting place between God and them.

But the third temple of the Christian faith is the church. The church. Now the church is not a building. Nor in the New Testament is a building described as a church.

Rather, the church is a Christian community. Whatever they are and whatever place they meet. Often we'll read in Paul's letters about the church that meets in the house of.

The church that meets in the house of. We never read that the place they met was the church. It was always the people who were the church. So here in 2 Corinthians 6 verse 16, the apostle Paul writes, We are the temple of the living God.

We, the people. Not it, the building, if there was such a thing. When are we in the West going to get this into our heads? When it comes to God's priorities, people always come before buildings.

[3 : 48] People always come before buildings. Buildings exist to serve the church. Not the other way around. Let's get this stuck into our minds. We, the people, are the temple of the living God.

And that means that people meet with God as they come in among us. We are the people. Not this is the space. Where people meet with God.

Now, if that is true, that we are the earthly temple of the living God, how should we care for and treat the church? Again, I'm not talking about the church as a building, but as the people of God.

How should we behave as the church of God, God's temple, where people meet with God as they come in among us? Well, in these verses, 2 Corinthians 6, 14 through 7, 1, Paul challenges us to think of the church as a temple in three ways.

Partnerships, promise, and purity. Partnerships, promise, and purity. We, the people of God, are the church of God, the temple of God.

[5 : 05] Therefore, we must take great care with this church. Great care indeed. First of all then, from verse 14 to 16, partnerships, partnerships.

Paul begins this section with the famous command taken from the agricultural world, Do not be unequally yoked with unbelievers. A yoke was a bar which joined two oxen together so they could pull together in one direction.

Farmers used them for plowing. Still today, we talk about a marriage between two people being unequally yoked. They're pulling in different directions. Now, this text has often been used in the context of marriage to say that a Christian should not marry a non-Christian.

Now, while that's true, a Christian should only marry in the Lord, that is not the meaning of this text. Paul is talking, rather, about life in the church.

Life in the church. As we know, the church in Corinth was plagued by false teachers and some church members were being drawn away by their poisonous doctrine. And it led to all kinds of wrong beliefs and wrong behaviors.

[6 : 21] Divisions and disagreements. Immorality, deviancy. All caused by these false teachers.

They denied salvation by grace alone in Christ alone and were therefore threatening the very heart of the gospel.

This is the context in which Paul says, Do not be unequally yoked with unbelievers. You see, these false teachers and their followers were pulling in a different direction from those who were following the apostolic doctrine of Paul.

A farmer wants to plow a field and he ties together two oxen in a yoke. One ox wants to go to the right, the other to the left. One wants to go forward, the other back.

The farmer will plow squint lines if he gets anywhere at all. If the gospel is going to prosper in and from the church in Corinth, every member of that church must pull in the same direction because only then may the seed of the gospel be sown and a harvest reaped.

But then someone might say, Well, look, can we not just tolerate each other's differences without dividing? We just tolerate each other's differences without dividing.

[7 : 41] For Paul, when it's a gospel issue, when what's at stake is our reconciliation with God and our salvation, we can tolerate no difference. Either one is saved by Christ alone or one is not saved at all.

These disagreements are not trivial or so small that they can be tolerated. Rather, if the integrity of the gospel, the harming of the church, and the mission of God is to be preserved, there must be a sharp division.

The yoke oxen must pull in the same direction. Paul then adds five reasons to show how sharp the distinction is between the false teachers and their doctrines and the true message of the gospel. What partnership has righteousness with lawlessness? What fellowship has light with darkness? What accord Christ with Belial? What portion does a believer share with an unbeliever? What agreement has the temple of God with idols?

Can you imagine the temple in Jerusalem filled with idols rather than dedicated to pure worship of God? There can be no compromise here.

[8 : 56] There can't be any compromise at all. There can be no peace treaty between Christ and the devil. Light battles against the darkness. Churches divide over things which, you know, in the eternal scheme of things, mean little or nothing.

Discipline cases, maybe. What to sing? How to sing it? The popularity of a prominent leader? Just to name a few. To divide over such things, as I suggest, both schismatic and wrong.

We shouldn't be dividing over such issues. We should find a way to work together. But other churches fail to divide over issues which, in the eternal scheme of things, mean a lot.

The authority of the Bible, the person of Jesus Christ, the primacy of the gospel, to name just a few. To not divide over such things is falling into the trap of compromise, of being yoked together with unbelievers.

I remember playing a game of football once where a member of my team kept scoring own goals. The infuriating thing was that he was doing it on purpose.

[10 : 13] Whenever someone passed the ball to him, he'd turn around and intentionally score an own goal. If we wanted to win, we had to get rid of him. So, we escorted him from the field and

fortunately told him not to come back.

If you're playing to win, you can't have someone like that on your team. If as a church, we want the gospel to prosper, we can't tolerate those among us who fight against the gospel.

Paul's message is clear. We must do everything we can to protect the purity and supremacy of the gospel. Because if we are the temple of God where people meet with God, we must be sure that we're pulling together in a gospel direction.

We must ensure that the God they are meeting when they come among us is the glorious God, the crucified Christ, the saving spirit, and not an idol created after the imaginations of false teachers.

What's the application for us here? There are many, but let me suggest that as Christians for whom the gospel means everything, we should do everything we can to maintain, to keep the main things, the main things.

[11 : 30] Keep the main things, the main things. Let's be ultra careful of being spiritual Don Quixotes, crazily charging at every windmill we can see. After a service where the glory of the gospel of Christ has been proclaimed, let's not lower ourselves to argue about the colour of the preacher's tie if he's wearing one at all.

Let's not lower ourselves to argue about the colour or the decor of the sanctuary or the quality of the coffee. Let's focus on the main thing, the glory of the gospel of Christ and how it's impacting our lives, changing us for the better because after all, we are God's temple, the meeting place of humanity and God.

Partnership, that's the first aspect of us being God's temple. Second, from verse 16 to verse 18, promise, promise.

Paul was Jewish. In his youth, he'd been educated by the most Jewish of rabbis. He knew all about the history of the temple in Jerusalem, all the Bible passages and texts in which the story of the temple was told.

So the first text he quotes is from Leviticus 26 verse 11 where in the context of the Ark of the Covenant hidden in the tabernacle, God says, I will make my dwelling among them and walk among them.

[12 : 54] I will be their God and they shall be my people. So, we are the temple of God, not a place, not a space, but a people. And God promises that he shall dwell in us and walk among us, that he shall be our God and we shall be his people.

To students of the Old Testament, these words should be eerily familiar. They are a restatement of God's covenant promise to Abraham. I will be their God, they will be my people.

In other words, the promise God made to Abraham almost thousands of years ago finds its fulfillment in the New Testament Christian church, in us. Furthermore, what a privilege to receive the promise that God shall make his dwelling among us and shall walk among us.

Can you believe that? That the same thing, God has made his dwelling among us and he walks among us. That the God of heaven and earth, who is a pure eyes and can behold sin, should make his home among us?

It goes beyond words. Do we think about this when we meet together as a church? That God himself, the God of Abraham, the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the God of the Apostle Paul, dwells among us, walks among us.

[14 : 24] It's the same way he walked in the Garden of Eden in the cool of the day with Adam and Eve, he walks among us. That he's present by his spirit in a closer and more intimate way than he was with the Israelites in the desert.

That God really is here right now. Paul next quotes from Isaiah 52, verse 11. Therefore go out from their midst and be separate from them, says the Lord, and touch no unclean thing.

The history of Israel, of course, is the history of their unfaithfulness to God. Time and again, we read how they defiled the temple with their idols and their uncleanness. They became too much like the people of the surrounding nations.

Some kings, like Ahaz, the father of Hezekiah, closed up the temple altogether. Others introduced statues of foreign gods into the temple. But the nation of Israel was never as healthy as it was when it walked in purity and holiness.

A holy temple is for a holy people. And although we know that in this life none of us will ever be perfectly holy, challenge is for us to ensure that we're pursuing holiness and purity in our lives, both as individuals and the church.

[15 : 38] anger and rage, malice and greed, jealousy and pride, unforgiveness. They have no place here.

We are the house of God and we must not even touch these unclean things. If we strive to be a healthy church, we must strive for holiness in everything we do.

Then there's another promise, this time taken from a double passage, Isaiah 43 verse 6 and 2 Samuel 7 verse 14.

Then I will welcome you and be a father to you and you shall be sons and daughters to me, says the Lord Almighty. In the New Testament age, of course, this means far more to us than it did to the original Jewish recipients because we know that through the death and resurrection of our Lord, we have been adopted as children of God, that in Him, we have not only become the righteousness of God, we become His sons and daughters.

So the picture is subtly changing in verse 18 from that of a temple to that of a family. The family of God meeting with their father where He's chosen to make His home.

[16 : 55] Remember, His home is not a building. Such that we can say that this building here is God's house. Rather, His home is His people. His sons and daughters.

And when we come together, we're here as sisters and brothers to meet with our father. But again, we need to understand the responsibility this lays upon us.

Those unbelievers, those false teachers and their followers to whom Paul has pointed earlier, warning us not to be unequally yoked with them, they neither belong in the temple of God nor in the family of God.

They don't belong. Imagine the scenario where an Israelite would invite a priest of Baal into the temple in Jerusalem to teach his foreign religion and to worship his idols.

Such a thing would be unthinkable. So why would we allow false teachers who deny the gospel to teach in our pulpits or to take any place in our services of worship?

[17 : 59] Now you'll notice that all these promises are conditional. If you do this, I will do that. In a sense, that conditionality has been met in Jesus Christ, the head of the church, because he's been faithful even unto death.

The blessings of these covenant promises flow down to us. But there's another sense in which that conditionality is dependent upon us as Christians. One of the reasons the Corinthian church was struggling so much is that it was tolerating these false teachers.

It was allowing them to continue spreading their poison. There was still darkness in the light of the church. The Corinthian Christians were still allowing the devil to coexist with Jesus in the temple.

So you see, the pursuit of holiness is the pursuit of the blessings of God's promises among us.

Even as we strain to believe the right things about God and to behave in a way that pleases God, we can expect God to pour out these blessings upon us, that he shall be with us, that he shall dwell with us, that he shall walk among us, that he shall be to us a father and we to him sons and daughters.

The call of the gospel is a call to holiness, the call to immediate faith in Christ is a call which will lead to long-term faithfulness to him.

[19 : 32] The health of our church is best pursued by the pursuit of holiness. So again, we need to ask ourselves, are there things that as a church we need to rid ourselves of?

Anger and bitterness, jealousy and greed, and so on. Let's search our hearts before we point the finger at anyone else.

Let's search our own hearts. Well, the third aspect of what it means to be God's temple in this passage is purity in chapter 7, verse 1.

Since we have these promises, beloved, let us cleanse ourselves and so on. So the church is a temple, all the members together, a dwelling place for God by his Holy Spirit, the presence of God on earth.

But the church is made up of individual members, each of whom must play his own part in its life. It's individual members Paul is now addressing in this verse.

[20 : 36] Since we have these promises, beloved, let us cleanse ourselves from every defilement of body and spirit, bringing holiness to completion in the feet of God. As a church and as individual Christians, we have gospel promises from God which shine brighter than the sun.

God shall be ours. God shall be with us. He shall walk among us. We shall be his children. He shall be our father. We take them for granted, but think about them for a wee while.

Think about them. The sovereign God of the universe, the Lord of heaven and earth, he is ours and we are his. And if he be for us, who can be against us?

In light of these great gospel promises, then how should we live? Although in this life none of us will ever be perfect, we must cleanse ourselves from every defilement of body and spirit, bringing holiness to completion.

In the temple in Jerusalem in the Old Testament, every item of furniture from candlesticks to curtains to everything, they had to be consecrated to God's service to be set apart from common use for divine use.

[21 : 53] We as individual Christians who make up the temple of God must set ourselves apart from common use and dedicate ourselves to God.

That's what it means to be holy, to be set apart by God and for God. God has saved us by his holiness for our holiness.

God has saved us by his holiness for our holiness. What keeps us from perfect or complete holiness in this life are the defilements of body and soul, spiritual, physical, moral dirt and uncleanness of sin, the grit in the wheel, the stone and the shoe, the inward and outward pollution, our sins both hidden and public, our sins of thought, word and deed, our sins of believing the wrong things about God and acting in the wrong way toward God, our sins of failing to love our neighbour as ourselves, our lack of Christ-likeness.

In a former generation, we talked far more about this than we do today, the fight for godliness and holiness, the constant struggle for cleansing and purity.

But this, as Christians, is our call, that in the feet of the Lord and strengthened by the promises he makes to us, we strive for purity in Christ-likeness.

[23 : 23] Like an athlete straining to reach the finish line, we shall strain to cleanse ourselves from every defilement. But perhaps we did not do enough of in a previous generation, is to explain that the grace of God's promises to us comes before the command to cleansing and holiness, that grace always precedes law.

In daily, intimate relationship with the Lord, who is our Father, that is the fear of God, we shall, on the foundation of the promises he's given us, cleanse ourselves from every defilement and pursue holiness.

Now, of course, for anything like me, you're going to fail far more than you succeed. But for all our failures, there's forgiveness available in the blood of Jesus, and for all our successes, there's always more ground to be won.

Remembering always that those sins we thought that we'd done away with years ago can come back to us with fresh vigor and in new ways.

For a city cathedral to be beautiful, and I love going to cathedrals, I love going to, where did we last year? Rippon Cathedral?

[24 : 41] I think it was? Rippon Cathedral? Litchfield Cathedral, that's a beauty, beauty of a building in Litchfield Cathedral that has three big, huge spires, wonderful. For a city cathedral to be beautiful requires everything about it to be clean, both outside and in.

But for a New Testament church to be beautiful requires holiness, clean hearts among its members, hearts filled with Jesus and hearts living for Jesus.

And I want to challenge us all, myself more than anyone else in this regard, it's the first Sunday of a new year, to what extent is cleansing myself of every defilement and bringing to completion the holiness of God a priority in my life?

To what extent is cleansing myself of every defilement and bringing to completion the holiness of God a priority in my life? Am I reading my Bible every day?

Am I learning more about Jesus every day? Am I praying for God to fulfill His gospel promises to me and in me and through me? Am I loving other Christians in this church?

[26 : 01] Is Crow Road Free Church a building or sacred place used for religious worship? Is my heart a meeting place between God and human beings?

The living God by His Spirit walks among us. Our Father is with us.

It's time for us as Christians to get serious about holiness. as I as as