

## The Quest for Holiness

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Three services

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*Consequently, when Christ came into the world, he said, "Sacrifices and offerings you have not desired, but a body you have prepared for me; in burnt offerings and sin offerings you have taken no pleasure. Then I said, 'Behold, I have come to do your will, O God, as it is written for me in the scroll of the book.'"*

*When he said above, "You have neither desired not taken pleasure in sacrifices and offerings and burnt offerings and sin offerings" (these are offered according to the law), then he added, "Behold, I have come to do your will." He does away with the first in order to establish the second. And by that will we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all." Hebrews 10:5-10*

Kings can be found in strange places.

I am sure that most of you remember Saddam Hussein of Iraq. He caused a lot of trouble in his region and wound up in a battle with the United States. You will recall we finally invaded Iraq to put an end to it all. But what an ending! Out of all the places I would have thought our Armed Forces would finally find Saddam, it wasn't in some hole in the ground under an old run down house. He was the King of Iraq! I expected him to go out in a blaze of glory, a huge battle to the death.

There is actually a somewhat similar story in the Bible. Israel had actually requested a king. God granted the request, and Samuel personally told Saul ahead of time he was going to be it. So Samuel had a public showing to make it official that Saul, son of Kish, had been chosen. But when they looked for him, he could not be found. It turns out that he had hidden himself among the baggage! Either he wasn't ready to be king, or he didn't want to be king.

Even more strange that these revelations about two kings, is how and where Christ, the king of kings, came into this world. Note where was he born! It was not in a palace or in the capital city of Jerusalem, as we might expect. It was in a manger. What was he doing there? Why did he come into the world?

Today is the Fourth Sunday in Advent as we prepare to celebrate the coming of Jesus at Christmas and his coming at the end of the age. We are using Chapter 10 from Hebrews as our focal point. This text from Hebrews directs us to the reason Jesus came at Christmas and why he will return. The writer also addresses the relationship between the Old Testament sacrificial system and the life of a Christian community.

Question: Do the demands of the sacrificial system still apply in any way to Christians? Obviously, we are not engaged in offering bloody sacrifices of animals or offering grains at our church, so the answer is clearly no. So why am I preaching on it this morning?

I am preaching on it this morning because people still create their own sacrificial systems, believing that these things help make them holy. Many, many people have the erroneous notion that the good things they are doing make them holy. Some give generously to the church. Some spend a tremendous amount of time in service to God. Some are great leaders within Christ's church and have skills which have greatly aided the church in its kingdom work. Some have spent a lifetime in service to Christ in his church. Some have spent a lifetime studying the word of God and some have been in church almost every Sunday. Do these things make a person any more holy? Not in themselves. None of this can ever make one of the Lord's worshipers into a holy person. I am not saying they do not have value, but I am saying that they do not make a person holy.

And holiness is of great importance to God. In Leviticus he tells us, "You must be holy, because I, the Lord your God, am holy." His will is to make his worshippers holy. Holiness is the nature of God. To be welcome in the presence of God, a person must be holy. To be holy means that one first has to be clean and pure.

God established the sacrificial system for his Old Testament people so they could be clean and holy in his presence. An animal or plant substitute could die temporarily in the place of the one for whom purity was sought. God used these sacrifices to remove guilt, sin, and impurity, at least for the moment.

To those who had been made clean, God gave his holiness when they came into his presence. If you obeyed his commands and did these various sacrifices, you were allowed contact with God, and God would communicate his holiness to his people. Understand this: it was what God did, and not what the people did, that brought them holiness.

Yet this sacrificial system could be only temporary. As Hebrews 10:6 puts it, "In burnt offerings and sin offerings you have taken no pleasure." The one thing the sacrifices did do was to point ahead to the coming sacrifice of our Savior Jesus Christ. But, Hebrews 10:4 tells us, "It is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins."

The notes from our ESV Study Bible explain this: "These animal sacrifices symbolized the payment for sin, but they did not accomplish it. No animal was worthy of paying the price for a human being's sin before a holy God. The law assumes that atonement and forgiveness occur by means of the legislated sacrifices; however, last year's sacrifice does not cover this year's sins, thus leaving guilty consciences and a remaining sinful condition. A permanent sacrifice is needed to deal permanently with sin." Hebrews 10:10 explains that we have that when it says, "We have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all."

Just as God had a means to convey his holiness and mercy to his Old Testament people, he offers the same to his New Testament people today through the proclamation of his Word, through the confession of our sins, and reception of the body and blood of our Lord in Holy Communion. Through these means we are made clean and brought into contact with his holiness.

So prepare the royal highway. The next two days we celebrate God keeping his promise and sending our Savior Jesus Christ to die and pay for our sins. But keep in mind, he is coming again, and all worshippers will finally be made completely holy at his coming and have a place in God's presence forever and ever. All hail King Jesus! Amen.