

IMMERSE

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Open Hands

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I've learned a lot about holiness in my years in youth ministry. Some lessons I've learned have come from the typical places. Other lessons have come from the unexpected places, catching me off guard and teaching me all at the same time. Two good examples of lessons I've learned have come from...

A Student I Know...

...who grew up in a Christian home with his pastor father and in a Christian school with his teacher mother. All of his friends were Christians and so was almost everyone he knew. The few people he knew who weren't Christians, he avoided. And he also avoided those he believed could go either way on the Christian/non-Christian line. (Better safe than sorry, he figured.)

As this student grew up, he began to learn more and more about the word *holiness*. Except he'd always believed *holiness* meant pointing his finger at "those people" who weren't like him and his Christian friends. After all, pointing his finger made him feel good about himself and his "holiness." To him, being holy meant knowing he followed certain rules while others flippantly broke them. He was holy, and they were not—and that's what holiness is all about.

Or at least that's what he thought.

Exodus...

...where we see God's people, Israel, having just left Egypt where they'd been enslaved. They were God's people, but in their oppression and fear of being forgotten, they cried out to God. And God heard their cry and answered.

At this point you might be flashing back to Charlton Heston triumphantly holding stone tablets in *The Ten Commandments* or Val Kilmer's voice in *The Prince of Egypt*. This Bible account (and those movies) continues as God, via Moses, leads his people out of slavery from Egypt, through the parted Red Sea, and to the mountain called Sinai.

Sinai is where the Ten Commandments were given to Moses—and where Israel begins her track record of forgetting them. They begin this track record by making a golden calf.

Sinai is also the place where God gave a specific and unique identity and mission to the Israelites. God told them, "Although the whole earth is mine, you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation" (Exodus 19:5-6).

The student struggling with holiness and Israel struggling in the wilderness demonstrate to us the unique challenge that holiness is for us. It's elusive, and yet, it's a biblical call. When I reflect on all of that, I realize that...

Israel Is...

These words, *kingdom of priests and a holy nation*, represent more than just cozy words or a new nickname. They're an identity and a mission for all the people of Israel.

During this time in the ancient near east, every country had its own god. And every country also had its own priests. If you were traveling to a country and wanted to know what its god was like, you went to the country's priest. The priest was the one who showed you his nation's god—who put the Divine on display for everyone to see. The priest was set apart; the priest was holy; a nation's priest was supposed to be like his nation's god. (Buddhists, for example, still refers to the Dalai Lama as "His Holiness.")

And now the God of Israel told them they'd be a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. Not just some of them, but all of them. This wasn't just a responsibility for a few select individuals to uphold but the identity and mission of all of Israel. Its identity as a nation is that each Jew was to be priest-like, that each was to be set apart, to be holy. Israel's mission was to be an entire nation that showed others who God is and what God is like.

This meant that for Israel, holiness wasn't something used to exclude others; rather holiness meant being set apart so that the nation of Israel could place God on display—to show the world who God is and what God is like. In fact, Israel was to go into the world and *be like God*, be God's representative, be God's image.

We Are...

The church has the same charge: As Peter wrote, we are "a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's special possession" (1 Peter 2:9). As followers of Jesus, the Messiah of Israel and the world, we are to be holy.

For youth workers, this means that our role isn't just to be an example so we can show students a better kind of life. We're more than mere role models, teaching proper behaviors and etiquette. We're to show students the divine; we're to embody God; we're to bring holiness up close and personal, to every student, to every parent...to everyone.

Our programs and teachings and small groups and events aren't just things we do to fill time, but things we do to show our students who God is and what God is like. Car rides home aren't just space for quality conversation; they're times to display the divine. School lunch isn't just a time to "be a pastor"; it's a time to "be God" for students.

We don't just sit with our kids and their friends, laugh at their jokes, and crack a few of our own to show that pastors can be hip, too. Rather, we show them a totally different kind of person. We're to *be like God*, be God's representative, be God's image.

Because we are a royal priesthood, a kingdom of priests, a holy nation, set apart for the sake of the world and for the sake of our students, so that they might find God in us. And when they find God in us, they can find God in themselves.

Students Are...

As student ministry pastors, we're not just a kingdom of priests *for* our students, but also *with* our students. Too often the thought of holiness and being holy creates an us/them schism, with some people self-righteously proclaiming godliness while all the while raising their noses and pointing their fingers at all the "heathens" who surround them (like my opening story about the student).

Holiness isn't for "us" (youth workers) to display to "them" (students) so that they might feel unworthy or unrighteous. Rather, holiness includes us all, invites us all, by the grace of God, to become a different kind of people for a different kind of world.

One of my students, after learning this, went to school and saw a kid being bullied. Instead of ignoring it—as he had often done—he went up to the bullied kid as a friend.

Another of my students had saved more than \$100 to buy a four-wheeler, but when he learned of thousands of homeless widows in Guatemala, he decided to forego the four-wheeler and instead show them what God is like by giving them his money.

A couple more of my students learned of kids in Rwanda who couldn't go to school because their parents had HIV or had died from AIDS. So they started their own organization to help these kids go to school. They raised money and awareness, and now all 10 of these Rwandan kids—though still affected by HIV/AIDS—have experienced the holiness of God in two middle school girls.

When our students learn that they're part of God's holy nation, everything can change: Bullied students are befriended, orphans and widows are remembered, and those left orphaned by HIV/AIDS are given hope. This is the result of a holiness that walks around in the lives of our students.

PowerPoint or People?

As their pastors, how are we equipping our students? For what are we equipping them?

It's easy to say that we're "equipping them for the works of ministry," but what does that really mean? We need to show them what it means to be a holy nation and a royal priesthood, not just what it means to be cool and listen to the newest music.

We need to give them chances to show people how God hears the cries of the oppressed by hearing it ourselves, not just what it means to tune out to everything and everyone. We need to give them chances to radically change the lives of others and see their own lives radically changed in the process, not just give them an escape from home or one more thing to do during the week.

Does equipping them for ministry mean having them run PowerPoint at our programs or other tasks that, though important, end up simply serving ourselves? Or does equipping them for ministry mean much more? Like giving them the chance to be the hands and feet and face of God in someone's life; to love and learn and change everything; to be a kingdom of priests, a holy nation, putting the Divine on display to the desperate world around us.

Holiness That Walks Around

When holiness begins to walk around, everything changes. A word that so easily conjured up an us/them mentality ceases to exclude itself against the world and begins to embrace the world for the sake of, and in the name of, God. This holiness, rather than being divisive, becomes the catalyst for God's redemption, love, grace, and forgiveness to radically change and restore everything.

And it all starts with God calling his people a holy nation. It continues with us hearing those words as our identity and mission. And it's left in the hands, feet, and lives of our students to be that holiness in the world.

Our holiness is not to remove us from "the world." It's to impart us into the world in a whole new way. We are blessed to be a blessing. We are restored by God so that we can join in the restoration of all things. We are made holy by God's grace, so that God working through us can in turn make all the world holy.

From a Pointing Finger to an Open Hand

Remember the opening story about the student with the skewed view of holiness?

It's a true story.

I was that student.

I thought I knew all the answers and had it all together. And I thought that made me holy.

Growing up, holiness was me pointing a finger at those other people who weren't "good enough" (which from my perspective was really just what I thought of as "not as good as me"). My pointed finger was the barometer of holiness. And sadly, it was a reflection of a false image of God. How many people saw my posture of a pointed finger and then saw God the same way?

Now I understand holiness differently. And now I seek to model it differently as well. Instead of pointing a finger, my holiness is an open hand, showing the love of God to a world that desperately needs it. My holiness is not self-serving, simply making me better. Being "holy" and "doing the work of ministry" never ends with myself, but always moves from myself to the world.

Our students' hands can do many things—from holding doors, to running PowerPoint, to changing tires, to serving food, to building houses.

We need to change their postures of holiness from pointing fingers to open hands.