

“Be thou holy, for I the Lord your God am Holy.” God is Holy. He expects nothing less than perfect holiness from those who call upon Him. So He exhorts His prophet to tell His people that they must be holy. They must be holy starting now, without exception, forever. And what does that holiness look like? “You shall not steal, nor deal falsely, nor lie to one another. And you shall not swear by My Name falsely”, says the Lord God, “nor shall you profane the Name of your God.”

So by now every Israelite was shaking in his sandals. There they were, in the desert, helpless, and each of them had done exactly what God forbids. And so it has been with you. The strong Word of Law God speaks – do not steal, do not lie, do not swear by His Name falsely, do not profane His Name – these Holy Commandments you too have broken.

Yes, under-reporting income to the government is stealing. Yes, exaggerating your deductions and expenses is lying. And yes, a so-called “white lie” is still a lie, and nothing but a lie. To have committed any sin against employer, parent, neighbor or civic ruler is to profane God’s Name. So God warns you – “Thou shalt not!”

Why should you not? God answers you “I AM the Lord.” That’s why. Because He’s God. And that’s enough reason. So His answer continues through His Apostle: “... indeed, O man, who are you to reply against God? Will the thing formed say to him who formed it, ‘Why have you made me like this?’ Does not the potter have power over the clay...?”

Of course He does. And that power He exhibits as He piles on the Law: Do not cheat your neighbor. Do not withhold wages from those to whom they are owed. Fear God. Why? Because He alone can say “I AM the Lord”. And because He is the Lord, because He is I AM, because He is Holy, you shall do no injustice. You must conduct yourself in righteousness with your neighbor. You shall not gossip. You shall not bear false witness, indeed you must explain everything in the kindest way.

That is what holiness does. If you fail to do any of these, if you fail to do one of them, if you try your best but fall short at all, you are not holy. And God commands that you be holy. And if you are not what God commands, death is yours. Because He is Holy. And nothing unholy can remain in His presence.

So be thou holy, for the Lord your God is Holy. For the sinner, it is a death sentence, isn’t it? You can’t be holy. For you are made of unholy stuff. And of that unholiness you have daily done unholy things, unholy things to friends, unholy things to family, unholy things to coworkers, unholy things to government, all of which is to say you have done unholy things to God.

So you have tasted a little bit of the Law. You have heard but a few verses of Leviticus, which has 27 chapters of “Thou shall nots”, and it is only one of five Books of the Law. So you find

yourself buried under the crushing weight of the Law, unable to free yourself, unable to save yourself.

Flee then with David, whose words fit well in your mouth. Cry out with him: “O Lord, deal not with us according to our sins, nor punish us according to our iniquities. O Lord, remember not our former iniquities against us; let your tender mercies come speedily to meet us, for we have been brought very low.”

But David’s prayer, your prayer, your frightened and repentant petition before the Holy God, doesn’t stop there. It can’t. Your prayer must continue “Help us, O God of our salvation, for the glory of your Name, O Lord. And deliver us, and provide atonement for our sins, for Your Name’s sake.” And so you can look nowhere but to the cross. There, in the blessed Passion of God Himself, in the sufferings of the Holy One, in the humiliation of God before heaven and earth, there is the Atonement for which you pray.

There is your only hope. There is your Deliverance. And that is what Holiness looks like. There, nailed to a cross, parched, bleeding, dying, reviled, scorned, there is your Savior. For you God, the Holy One, was brought very low. He was brought to the dust of death.

He who gave the Law was crushed by that Law as He bore all your wrongdoing, your lust, your pride, your untruthfulness. He bore them to death - His death. And there is David’s prayer, there is your prayer answered. For God has provided atonement for your sins. And He has done it for His Name’s sake. He has fulfilled the whole Law, for you.

So what is left for you is deliverance. What is left for you is salvation. What is left for you is victory over death in His Resurrection. What is left for you is the Font, the Eucharist, Holy Absolution. What is left for you is the saving Gospel Word. Knowing what you have deserved magnifies the grace of God in the blessed Passion, in the willing sacrifice of His Son.

His grace towards you is boundless. His mercy towards you is beyond measure. And this He freely gives to you. Why? Because He is the great I AM. He is Holy. He is the Lord. And because He is Holy, He declares you holy.