Be Holy as I Am Holy

On the Image of God Lived Out as Action

Rob Massie

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Children, Heirs, Sufferers, Glorified

Several verses have been turning over in my mind throughout this morning. Romans 8 keeps coming back:

> The Spirit Himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs: heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ, if indeed we suffer with Him, that we may also be glorified together. For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us. For the earnest expectation of the creation eagerly waits for the revealing of the sons of God. (Romans 8:16–19)

Just because we are children of the Father does not mean we will be exempt from suffering. The same passage that promises adoption also promises tribulation. But the suffering of this present time cannot be weighed against the glory that is going to be revealed. The whole creation is *leaning forward*, *eagerly waiting* for the sons of God to be revealed. The creation knows what is coming. The creation is more theologically informed about us than we usually are about ourselves.

Faith is action. There is no such thing as inert faith. Faith is always demonstrated through some act of trust in God despite the circumstances. The kind of faith that produces no movement

is not the kind the New Testament calls faith. Hold that thought for a moment; it will run as a thread through everything I want to show you this morning.

And then later in the same chapter, Paul says:

"For whom He foreknew, He also predestined to be conformed to the image of His Son, that He might be the firstborn among many brethren" (Romans 8:29).

If you have found yourself in Christ through the Spirit, then you are *destined* to be conformed to that image. That is not a hope. That is a destiny. And that destiny takes us all the way back, back, back, to the very beginning.

"Let Us Make Man in Our Image"

Genesis 1. God has made the heavens and the earth, the seas and the sun and the moon and the stars. He has created creatures to fill each domain: birds for the air, fish for the sea, beasts and creeping things for the earth. And then:

> Then God said, "Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness; let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth." So God created man in His own image; in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them. Then God blessed them. (Genesis 1:26–28)

So we have creatures that have dominion in each space (fish in the sea, birds in the air, beasts on the land) and then *one creature* whose vocation is to image God to the rest of creation. To demonstrate God's character of love and blessing to everything else God has made.

And notice what gets us excited here. Up to this point in the story, we know only that God is creative. He has just spent six days creating all the good things we see and hear and experience. But now in verse 28, we learn something else: *God blessed them.* God is not only

creative; *God is a Creator who loves to bless*. That is the second characteristic we learn about God in Scripture, and it is not a small thing. It tells us what kind of being we have been created in the image of. *Be fruitful, multiply, fill the earth, subdue it, have dominion.* You have been given a verb spoken over you. You are commanded *to be* something. And God never says *be* without giving us the power to be. How cruel would it be to command someone to do or to be something, and then not empower them to be it? God's commands always come with God's empowerment to meet them.

The Living Soul, the Breath of God

Move to Genesis 2:7:

"And the Lord God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living being" (Genesis 2:7).

Dust *and* breath. Earth *and* spirit. God formed our material substance out of the ground he was working with, and then he added something that is not in the ground: he breathed his own breath into us, and we became a living being. Romans 8 reminds us that what we read about in Genesis 2 has not stopped happening to us; the Spirit of adoption *now* gives us life to be who he has called us to be in this world.

But how do we *do* that? How do we be the image of God? Here is a question worth pausing on. The pagan religions of the ancient world had a very clear sense of how their gods got imaged. When the Canaanites or the Egyptians or the Babylonians wanted to image a god, they carved an idol with the *characteristics* of that god. The idol of a fertility god would have exaggerated fertility features. The idol of a war god would have a sword and armor and a fierce stance. The image had the characteristics of the god.

So what does God have that we are supposed to image? It is not eyes, nose, mouth, hands. The biblical writers sometimes speak anthropomorphically of God, but Jesus himself reminds us:

"God is Spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth" (John 4:24).

And after the resurrection, when his disciples thought they were seeing a ghost in the locked room, Jesus invited them to touch him and said:

"Behold My hands and My feet, that it is I Myself. Handle Me and see, for a spirit does not have flesh and bones as you see I have" (Luke 24:39).

So we are not to think God himself has flesh and bones and eyes and ears. The image is not anatomical. The image is *character*. The mandate to image God concerns who we are *being* and what we are *doing*, not what we look like.

All creatures have a brain. Only one creature has a *mind*. All creatures have a heart that pumps blood. Only one creature has a *heart* in the higher sense: the place of intention, of decision, the capacity to act in love and in justice. That heart-mind, lit by the breath of God, is where the image lives. And the image is exercised by what we *do*.

Leviticus 19: How Holiness Looks on a Tuesday

This is why I love Leviticus 19. The New Testament writers were also excited about it; they quote from it more than from almost any other chapter in the Torah. And the reason is that Leviticus 19 takes the abstract command to image God and translates it into the practical actions of a normal week.

"Speak to all the congregation of the children of Israel, and say to them: 'You shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy'" (Leviticus 19:2).

Notice that. *You shall be holy.* It is a command. *Be.* I cannot tell you how often I have heard, in Christian circles, the assumption that you cannot really *be* holy: that holiness is reserved for after death, for some other category of person, for the elite saints. It has almost become an axiom of Christian piety that holiness is unreachable. And yet here is God himself, telling Moses to command the whole congregation: *You shall be holy.* He would not give the command if he did not also give the power to obey it.

But what does that holiness *look like* practically? When I read the verse, I almost heard the Lord say, *Read on*. So I read on. And what I found, after spending an afternoon writing out the positive form of every commandment in the chapter, was this: Leviticus 19 is essentially a practical handbook for what it means to image God in ordinary life.

Here, in their positive form, are some of the actions Leviticus 19 calls *holiness*:

Honor your parents. Love only God. Let all your offerings be freely given, God doesn't want anything coerced. Do not consume all that you produce; leave a margin for those in need. Speak truthfully. Don't manipulate others by swearing to God. Show patience to the infirm. Do not be cruel. Do justly. Love mercy. Protect your neighbor's reputation. Have a heart for your brother. Show mercy. Forgive.

And the chapter summarizes the whole section with a single line that Jesus would later identify as the second great commandment:

". . . you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the Lord" (Leviticus 19:18).

Jesus picks this up directly: *Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength* (Deuteronomy 6:5) and *love your neighbor as yourself* (Leviticus 19:18). Those are the two great commandments, and Jesus says all the law and the prophets hang on them (Matthew 22:40).

Love the Stranger

But if you read only that far in Leviticus 19, you might stop at *love your brother* and call it good. If you grew up under pressure from negative powers all around, as the Jewish people had been from Egypt onward, you might reasonably interpret the verse as *love your fellow Jew*. Stranger? That is a step too far.

So pay attention to what Leviticus 19 says next:

> And if a stranger dwells with you in your land, you shall not mistreat him. The stranger who dwells among you shall be to you as one born among you, and you shall love him as yourself; for you were strangers in the land of Egypt: I am the Lord your God. (Leviticus 19:33–34)

Love the stranger as yourself. Not only the neighbor. Not only the brother. The *stranger* (the one with no claim, no kinship, no covenant standing) must be loved *as yourself*. And the reasoning the chapter gives is simple: *for you were strangers in the land of Egypt*. The Lord rescued you when you had no standing. *Therefore* extend the same to the next person who arrives without standing. The math of grace is always: *you received unfair grace, therefore you give unfair grace*.

There are roughly eight billion strangers in the world. The mandate of holiness is to image a God who already loves all of them.

Look at how polarized the world has become. Even the most carefully built political coalitions in our country cannot stay together for a hundred days. The reason is not really a failure of strategy. The reason is that when there is no foundation of holiness toward God, *be holy as I am holy*, and no understanding that holiness *means giving up your rights for the other*, then everyone grasps for theirs, and the coalitions fly apart. Holiness is the only foundation that

can hold a community of strangers together long enough for them to discover that they are not, in the end, strangers.

Circumcise Your Heart

And we may say, Rob, I can't do that. I can't even love my neighbor as myself, much less the stranger somewhere on the other side of the world. Listen to Deuteronomy 10:

> Therefore circumcise the foreskin of your heart, and be stiff-necked no longer. For the Lord your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great God, mighty and awesome, who shows no partiality nor takes a bribe. He administers justice for the fatherless and the widow, and loves the stranger, giving him food and clothing. Therefore love the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt. (Deuteronomy 10:16–19)

The stiff neck comes from serving the gods of this world. Think about the context: *the golden calf*. If you have ever worked on a farm with calves, you know that the first response of a calf to a halter is to stiffen its neck and resist. The calf does not know that the halter is meant to lead it somewhere good; it knows only that its neck is being pulled in a direction it did not choose. Israel had become *like* the gods it had been worshiping. Instead of having a wholehearted devotion to the God of heaven, they had let their hearts and minds be conformed to the image of the *creature*, the calf they had said *brought us up out of Egypt*. And so when God pulled the halter, the people stiffened their necks. Just like Adam and Eve in the garden, listening to the serpent suggest that God was holding out on them, the people resisted the *good* commands of God.

We can do that too. We can begin to believe that God's good command is not really for us, or not really good for us, or beyond our reach. But I refuse to believe in a God who creates a creation, breathes into it the breath of life and the power of mind and heart, and then does not

also give it the capacity to execute the commands he has given. What a cruel God that would be. He breathes the Spirit into us. With the Spirit comes the capacity to obey the command.

And look at what Deuteronomy 10 says the *circumcised heart* will image. Verse 18: *He administers justice for the fatherless and the widow, and loves the stranger, giving him food and clothing.* Three categories. The fatherless, those with no *protection*. The widow, those with no *provision*. The stranger, those with no *status*. The three most vulnerable categories of person in the ancient world (and in ours). And the God we are commanded to image *administers justice* for all three.

Restorative, Not Retributive

Pause on the word *justice* there. We have to be careful about what we are hearing. Modern English usage of *justice* leans heavily toward *retribution*. When a violent criminal does not get what we consider the harshest possible sentence, we say *justice was not served*. We are talking about *retributive* justice, payment for wrong done.

But that is not the kind of justice God administers for the fatherless, the widow, and the stranger. God's justice is *restorative*. Someday I want to preach a longer sermon on hell, because I do not think God is sitting in heaven saying, *You rejected the most holy creature on earth, and so I'm going to burn you forever, and that is the only thing you have coming to you.* I do not think God is in the *retributive* justice business. (Now, you and I can condemn ourselves to a myriad of hells, in this life and the ones to come. But that is a different matter from God positively willing your eternal torment as recompense.) The God of Deuteronomy 10 is in the *restoration* business. *How do we take this breach and put it back together?* That is the question the kingdom is always answering. The fatherless are restored to protection. The widow is

restored to provision. The stranger is restored to status. Each of these is an *injustice* God repairs. The justice he administers is the kind that puts back what was torn apart.

And then comes the *therefore* of verse 19:

"Therefore love the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt" (Deuteronomy 10:19).

Whenever you see *therefore* in the Bible, ask what it is *there for*. It is there for *love*. *Because your God is this kind of God, you be this kind of person.* When we see enslaved people, that is not a time for wagging the finger of judgment. That is a time for breaking open our hearts and pouring out the one thing we have: the action of prayer, which is us speaking God's will into the world. What is God's will? *That the stranger, the widow, the orphan would have justice.* That God's love would be poured out into the world. *Therefore* we take action like our Father.

The Groaning Spirit and the Practical Hand

Sometimes we do not know how to pray as we ought. But Romans 8 reminds us that the Spirit himself makes intercession for us with groanings too deep for words (Romans 8:26). There are moments when we do not even know what the will of God is in a particular situation, and there is a groaning deep down inside us, by the Spirit, that prays what we cannot articulate. This is the Spirit of adoption, the *Abba* Spirit, at work in us.

But the Spirit's groaning is not a substitute for the hand's action. What good would it be to pray for the fatherless, the widow, and the stranger and then take no practical action to help them? James 2 catches this exactly:

If a brother or sister is naked and destitute of daily food, and one of you says to them, "Depart in peace, be warmed and filled," but you do not give them the things which are

> needed for the body, what does it profit? Thus also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead. (James 2:15–17)

You may not have gleaned all your fields. You may have left the corners unharvested, exactly as Leviticus 19 commanded, so that there is something *left over* for the one in need. But if instead of giving from your storehouse you say *be warmed and be filled* and walk away, your prayer is empty. We are sons and daughters of the Father. Let's have his character. Let's image him in this world by *doing* what his character would do.

Not by Works: Created for Works

Someone will object: *Rob, the grace of God doesn't push us in that direction. Ephesians 2:8 says we are saved by grace through faith, not by works, lest any man should boast.* And it does say exactly that. The salvation we have received is, indeed, a gift of God, not the wages of our striving. But read the very next verse:

"For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them" (Ephesians 2:10).

We are not saved *by* works. We are saved *for* works. Created in Christ Jesus *for good works*, works the Father prepared in advance for us to walk in. Grace is not the abolition of action. Grace is what makes the action *possible*.

"Be Holy, for I Am Holy"

Peter picks up the same Leviticus 19 thread directly:

> Therefore gird up the loins of your mind, be sober, and rest your hope fully upon the grace that is to be brought to you at the revelation of Jesus Christ; as obedient children, not conforming yourselves to the former lusts, as in your ignorance; but as He who called

> you is holy, you also be holy in all your conduct, because it is written, "Be holy, for I am holy." (1 Peter 1:13–16)

Look at the structure. Gird up the loins of your mind. In a battle of who-is-your-daddy, the question is whose mind you have on. Rest your hope fully upon the grace that is to be brought to you at the revelation of Jesus Christ. The image of God in Jesus Christ is being developed in us. You may say, That is too high a mountain. I can never be the holiness of God. I can never live the life of Christ. I can never love my enemies the way Jesus did. And Peter answers: Rest your hope on the grace that is being brought. Jesus Christ is being revealed in us, gradually, by the Spirit that is at work.

Have you ever had one day, just one, where you walked through the day and realized that the Lord had helped you with some things that used to trip you up? You felt light. Something had matured. Something had grown that had not been there before. *That* is the image of God being revealed in you. The mountain is climbed one day at a time.

Romans 12: The Catalog of the Renewed Mind

Paul's parallel to Leviticus 19 is in Romans 12. Just as Leviticus 19 takes the abstract command *be holy* and translates it into a catalog of specific holy actions, Romans 12 takes the abstract command *be transformed by the renewing of your mind* and translates it into a catalog of specific renewed-mind actions:

> I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that you present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God, which is your reasonable service. And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what is that good and acceptable and perfect will of God. (Romans 12:1–2)

And then, verses 9 through 21, Paul rolls out the catalog of what the renewed mind looks like *in action*:

> Let love be without hypocrisy. Abhor what is evil. Cling to what is good. Be kindly affectionate to one another with brotherly love, in honor giving preference to one another; not lagging in diligence, fervent in spirit, serving the Lord; rejoicing in hope, patient in tribulation, continuing steadfastly in prayer; distributing to the needs of the saints, given to hospitality. Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse . . . Do not set your mind on high things, but associate with the humble. Do not be wise in your own opinion. Repay no one evil for evil. (Romans 12:9–17, selected)

Notice: God does not want us up on a pedestal. He does not want our minds to be exalted. *Oh, we've come, we've become children of God*, and then we spend most of our time degrading those who are not. That is the opposite of the image. *Associate with the humble. Repay no one evil for evil.* These are the practical actions of the transformed mind.

"Be Perfect, as Your Father in Heaven Is Perfect"

And Jesus, in the Sermon on the Mount, picks up exactly the same thread Moses laid down:

> You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I say to you, love your enemies, bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you, and pray for those who spitefully use you and persecute you, that you may be sons of your Father in heaven; for He makes His sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust. (Matthew 5:43–45)

Look at the move. *Bless* those who curse you. The whole arc that runs through Genesis 12 (*I will bless you, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed*) comes home in this

command. From Abraham to here, the people of God have been a blessing-people. Even toward those who do not deserve it. Especially toward those who do not deserve it. *That you may be sons of your Father in heaven.* The image-bearing vocation, articulated in Matthew 5 as plainly as in Genesis 1.

And Jesus does not pull back from the high call:

"Therefore you shall be perfect, just as your Father in heaven is perfect" (Matthew 5:48).

Or as Paul says it in Ephesians 5:1:

"Therefore be imitators of God as dear children" (Ephesians 5:1).

Press On

And we say, *How do I climb this mountain?* Listen to Paul, who was further up the mountain than most of us, and who said:

> Not that I have already attained, or am already perfected; but I press on, that I may lay hold of that for which Christ Jesus has also laid hold of me . . . Brethren, I do not count myself to have apprehended; but one thing I do, forgetting those things which are behind and reaching forward to those things which are ahead, I press toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus. Therefore let us, as many as are mature, have this mind. (Philippians 3:12–15)

Have you grown cold in your faith? I have, at times. I have taken too many hurts, built up too many protections and walls, hedged my bets. The answer is not to flagellate yourself for the cold seasons. The answer is to *press on*. We have been *apprehended* by Christ (captured, taken hold of) and now our task is to lay hold of the One who has laid hold of us. Let his mind be in you, the mind that was also in Christ Jesus (Philippians 2:5). Forget the things behind. Reach forward. Press toward the goal.

That is the upward call. That is the image of God being developed, one day at a time, in the children he has adopted. And the creation is *leaning forward*, waiting for us to be revealed.