

# Meeting With Christ

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Practical and Exegetical Studies on the Words of Jesus Christ

Yves I-Bing Cheng, M.D., M.A.

Based on sermons of Pasteur Eric Chang

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## CALLED TO BE SAINTS

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### Matthew 4:18-22

In our previous lesson, we were studying Matthew 4:18-22. And you will remember that we focused our attention on Jesus' statement when He said, *Follow Me, and I will make you fishers of men*. It was a lesson in which we stressed the notion of discipleship, discipleship from Jesus' perspective. And I drew your attention to the fact that the word 'disciple' is used 268 times in the NT: 238 times in the gospels and 30 times in the book of Acts, for a total of 268.

### Where is the disciple?

If you take a closer look at these statistics, you will notice this strange thing: that the word 'disciple' disappears completely after the book of Acts. In other words, there is a total absence of the use of the word 'disciple' after the book of Acts. And yet, nobody would say that discipleship is no longer a concern for the writers of the Epistles.

Although the very word 'disciple' is no longer there, the idea of discipleship continues to be an important theme of the Epistles, and particularly for the apostle Paul. Take for example 1Corinthians 11:1 where he writes, *Imitate me, just as I also imitate Christ*. In other translations, you have, *Be ye followers of me, even as I also am of Christ* (King James Version). 'You follow me in the same way that I follow Christ.' Well, if that's not discipleship, I don't know how we would call that.

So given the fact that the idea of discipleship is present throughout the whole NT, how did the writers, after the book of Acts, call the true believer if the word 'disciple' is no longer used? When you study this question, you will find equivalent words like believers, brothers and sisters, servants, the church. Today I would like to talk to you about one word that is very special to the apostle Paul, a word which for Paul is a synonym of 'disciple'. And it is the word 'saint'. In most of his letters, Paul greets his readers, the true believers, the church, by addressing them as 'saints'.

Take for example Romans. *To all who are in Rome, beloved of God, called to be **saints*** (Romans 1:7).

Take 1Corinthians. *To the church of God which is at Corinth, to those who are sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be **saints**...*

Or take Ephesians. *To the **saints** who are in Ephesus, and faithful in Christ Jesus...* And the list goes on.

When Paul talks about the ‘disciples’, he has one favourite word, and it is the word ‘saints’. He calls the true disciples of Christ by the word ‘saints’, the holy ones, the holy people of God. The Lord Jesus is called the Holy One of God in Mark 1:24, and the followers of Jesus are called by Paul, the holy ones, the saints.

This word ‘saint’, or ‘holy’, *hagios* in Greek, Paul uses it 76 times in his epistles. It is an important word for Paul. And there are 3 other words for holiness, all of which are almost exclusively used by Paul. We are not mistaken when we say that Paul is profoundly concerned with holiness. I think that it is not too strong to say that he has a consuming concern for holiness. Paul is concerned to stress that no man is a true believer unless he is a saint, a holy one. You are either one who is holy or you are not a Christian at all. Paul puts it very bluntly.

Now, why is Paul so profoundly concerned with holiness? This is the main question that I would like to address in this lesson. Why is Paul so concerned with holiness?

### **Experiencing holiness**

The concept of holiness is not an easy one to convey to a person. If you look at a theological dictionary, you will see pages and pages of explanation, at the end of which you are still wandering what holiness is. I don’t think that Paul’s understanding of holiness comes from books that he has read. I would say that his concept of holiness is based on his experience. What experience? Well, you know what happened to Paul. He met with Christ on the road to Damascus. And this experience of God completely shattered His whole life. Anyone who has experienced God knows what holiness is, at least in its basic meaning.

When Paul met with God in Christ on the Damascus road, that put an imprint upon his soul about what holiness is. He came away from there, having been blinded by the light of God’s holiness. He came away shaking, trembling. He had met with God! Anyone who has had an experience like that cannot think about anything else but holiness. The matter of holiness will be in his mind for the rest of his life.

So this is my first point. Why is Paul so concerned with holiness? Because he has experienced holiness in his meeting with God. When you look into the Bible, you will find that this is often the case with anyone who has met with God.

### **The goodness and the severity of God**

Now holiness, if you want to take it down from a theological term, is the experience of the goodness of God. *O taste and see that the Lord is good* (Psalm 34:8). This holiness, this goodness of God is like a two-edged sword. It cuts both ways. As Paul says in Romans 11, the goodness of God can also be the severity of God. You see, God’s goodness expresses itself on a one hand in salvation, and on the other hand in judgment because He cannot tolerate anything that is evil. God’s goodness is expressed in His saving mercy and grace to those who repent. But if it is rejected, His goodness will be expressed in the defence of goodness, i.e. in the defence of righteousness and the condemnation of all that is sinful.

Paul experienced God. He experienced God’s holiness. He understood that God is holy and good in the sense that he will not compromise with what is bad.

### **Made holy by God**

Now listen to this next point. Paul understood that God is also good in the sense that He is prepared to make others good those who repent of their sins. In other words, God’s holiness is a

holiness that brings about the holiness of His people. It is a creative holiness, a goodness that can be transferred to His people and that must be transferred to His people if they are to be His people at all. If you like theological terms, we call that ‘positional’ holiness. Though we are not totally sinless, we are in a position of holiness before God because of what Christ did for us. That’s what Jesus revealed directly to Paul on the Damascus road. Jesus said to him, ...*that they* (i.e. the unbelievers) *may receive forgiveness of sins and an inheritance among those **who are sanctified** by faith in Me.* You are made holy when you have faith in Jesus.

Paul sees this as a central element of holiness. We are saints only because God’s holiness has made us holy. In Romans 11:16, Paul says that if the root is holy, so must the branches be holy also. If the root is holy, and God is that root, then the branches, the disciples, must be holy. The same reasoning is found in the words of the Lord Jesus in John 15. *I am the vine, you are the branches.* Jesus is the vine that gives life to the branches. We are those branches, attached to Him in the same way that the branches are attached to the vine. If the vine is holy, and if you are truly one of its branches, then clearly you must also be holy. Because God has transferred His holiness unto you. You have been made holy through the work of the Holy Spirit. Therefore if you are a disciple, you are a saint. Paul’s reasoning is very clear.

### **Paul, an Old Testament scholar**

Why did Paul use the word ‘saints’ instead of ‘disciples’? Because he met with God and since then, he was absolutely preoccupied with holiness. That’s the first reason. Now, here is another reason why Paul is so preoccupied with this matter of holiness. Paul is a man who is steeped in the OT. His whole thinking is soaked in the OT and governed by it. And because of his knowledge of the OT, he is well aware that holiness is a major preoccupation of the OT as it is in the New. If you want to see where holiness stands in the OT, all you have to do is to open a concordance and look under the word ‘holy’ and ‘holiness’ and you will see lines and lines of references through the OT. What Paul understood as a result of his study of the OT is that God’s dealing with us is on the basis of holiness. God’s dealing with His people is on the basis of holiness. Let me give you five points in order to establish that.

Firstly, you notice that when a person comes to God, God separates him out of the world. He called Israel out of Egypt. As you know, Egypt represents the world in the OT. God separates people out of the world in order that they may serve Him. This separation from the world is what holiness is about. Paul quotes the same thing in the NT. In 2Corinthians 6:17, he quotes directly from a passage found in the book of Numbers and applies it to the Christians. *Therefore, come out from among them, and be **separate** (be holy), says the Lord...* Separation from all uncleanness is what holiness is all about.

Secondly, the people that God separates, He redeems them. The Israelites are spoken of as God’s redeemed people. You are redeemed from your old way of life. You are bought out from there. Paul talks about this in Romans and in 1Corinthians. 1Corinthians 6:20 says, *For you were bought at a price ... God bought you with a price, with the blood of Christ. You don’t belong to yourself anymore. You belong to God in the sense of being His possession. And to be holy means to belong to God.*

Thirdly, we find that the redeemed people, the people who now live under God’s covenant and God’s command to holiness, are the people with whom God dwells. They are holy because they become His dwelling place, His temple. This is the point that Paul is making and applies to the Christians in 2Corinthians 6:16: *... for we are the temple of the living God ...* So we are holy because God lives in us.

Fourthly, everywhere in the OT as in the NT, God’s holiness is expressed in a concern to impart this holiness to His people by the power of His Holy Spirit. Just listen to Ezekiel 11:19: *Then I will give them one heart, and I will put a new spirit within them, and take the stony heart out of their*

*flesh, and give them a heart of flesh.* That's holiness, to have a heart of stone transformed into a heart of flesh, according to God's righteous standards. Paul applies the same thing to the Christians in Ephesians 4:24 when he says, ... *put on the new man which was created according to God, in righteousness and true holiness.* Our changed into a new creature gives us the responsibility to live according to God's holiness.

And fifthly, God's holiness will be expressed in judgment upon His holy people if they don't live a life that is in line with God's sanctifying work in them. God called His people to holiness in order that His name be glorified. And failure to live the kind of life to which He called His people will bring condemnation. The people of Israel, the holy people, came under God's judgment when they failed to live holy lives. Ezekiel 18:30 puts it very specifically. *I will **judge** you, O house of Israel... I will judge you because you have not lived according to My ways.*

Don't think that this is just OT stuff and that the saints of the NT, being under grace, can avoid any form of judgment no matter how they behave. Being a saint does not exempt you from judgment. This is very clear in Paul's mind. Just read what he says in 1Corinthians 11:31-32, *For if we would judge ourselves, we would not be judged. But when we are judged, we are **chastened by the Lord**, that we may not be condemned with the world.* Paul is saying that if the Corinthian believers had examined themselves, they would not have been chastened by God, they would not have come under God's judgment.

### **Be holy, for I am holy**

I hope that by now you see why it was so important for Paul to call the Christians, the 'saints'. He was very concerned that the Christians see that they are God's holy ones in the sense that they are separated from the world, separated because they are different in their moral standards and in their conduct.

Just as Paul's letters begin with the mention that he is addressing to the saints, every letter in Paul ends with a stress on the way these saints ought to live. When Paul says that we are saints, he doesn't just mean that we have a special position called 'holiness'. He means also that our conduct must fit those who are called saints. As Paul says again and again, 'let your manner of conduct be worthy of your calling.'

We cannot separate the holiness of God from the moral quality expressed by those who have been called to be saints by God. Because the notion of holiness emphasizes not only the relation to God, but also the corresponding moral conduct. Holiness implies a relationship with God that is expressed through a behaviour that rightly responds to God. The apostle Peter puts it for us in a nutshell in 1Peter 1:15 where he says, ...*as He who called you is holy (i.e. God), you also be holy in all your conduct*' And Peter gives us the Scriptural reason. Verse 16: *because it is written, 'Be holy, for I am holy.'* That's why.

### **Discipleship and holiness in the Old Testament**

One last point before we close. Being the OT scholar that he was, Paul knew that the word 'saint' is also used in the OT. And he was probably much aware that when that term is used in the OT, it is often used in connection with following God. We have a beautiful example of this in Jeremiah 2:2-3. And I'd like to read that passage for you to show you where in the OT we see the connection between discipleship and holiness. Jeremiah 2:2-3. God tells Jeremiah to go and to speak to the people of Jerusalem.

*Jeremiah 2:2. Go and proclaim in the ears of Jerusalem, saying, 'Thus says the Lord, "I remember concerning you the devotion of your youth, the love of your betrothals, your following after Me in the wilderness (this is where discipleship comes in), through a land not sown. 3 Israel was holy to the Lord, the first of His harvest...'"*

*Israel was **holy** to the Lord.* Do you see the connection between discipleship and holiness? Israel was once God's disciple because they followed Him in the wilderness. And because they followed Him, they were then holy. Paul noticed this connection in the OT. In the NT, Paul's letters will stress not so much the external manner of following, but the spiritual following after God in holiness.

Today in this lesson, my intention was to show you how Paul understands discipleship. And we ended up discussing the matter of holiness in the life of the believer because that was Paul's emphasis about discipleship. Paul doesn't use the word disciple. He calls the Christians, 'saints', because for Paul, you are not a Christian unless you are a holy one, a saint.

In spite of all the theology that is behind the concept of holiness, we will begin to understand it only when we experience God spiritually, when we meet with Him. Just like Paul, Moses, Ezekiel. It is an encounter with God that makes such an impact in your life that you can't think but about the holiness of God in your walk with Him.