

FREE TO BE HOLY

A BIBLICAL THEOLOGY
OF SANCTIFICATION

MATT O'REILLY

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INTRODUCTION

I distinctly remember thinking, *There must be more to Christianity than this*. I was a teenager. I was a Christian. And I was frustrated. I was frustrated because so much of Christian teaching focused on hope for the next life but had little to say regarding hope for this life. I've since learned what was happening to me. I was reacting to a form of American Christianity in which the gospel was all about God's forgiveness—freedom from guilt and condemnation—but very little was said about freedom from sin. In fact, the general assumption was that sin is just part of being human. You can't really be free from it. At least, not *completely* free. People stumble. There's not much to be done about it. So just grin and bear it and be grateful for God's mercy. And remember—Christians aren't perfect, just forgiven.

This widespread version of Christianity—offering heaven in the next life but not freedom from sin in this life, offering freedom from the consequences of sin but not from the power of sin—promises deliverance from guilt but not from the things that produce that guilt. Such a truncated gospel contains only half of the story. I've written this book about the rest of the gospel—the part we sometimes forget.

Now let me be clear: I'm not suggesting that forgiveness isn't part of the good news. To the contrary, forgiveness is foundational. It's essential. When Jesus gathered his followers for one last meal before going to the cross, he insisted that his coming death was for the forgiveness of sins (Matt. 26:28). The book of Acts tells us that the apostles repeatedly proclaimed the forgiveness of sins (Acts 2:38; 10:43; 13:38; 26:18). The apostle Paul insists that in Christ we have the forgiveness of sins (Eph. 1:7; Col. 1:14). There's no gospel without the good news that our sins are forgiven in Jesus. But that's not the whole story. There's more. Much more. While forgiveness is essential to the gospel, it's only *part* of the gospel. Sadly, much of the church has forgotten the rest. I've written this book to help us remember.

So if forgiveness is only part of the gospel, what's the rest of it? In short, the rest of the gospel consists of the good news that Jesus died and was raised to set us free,

not only from the guilt of sin but also from its power. Jesus died so that we can be thoroughly transformed—so that we can consistently embody his character. In a word, the rest of the gospel is *holiness*.

This brings us to the question of holiness, and it turns out there are two. First, what is holiness? Second, how holy can we expect to be in this life? Now different people have different ideas about words like *holy* and *holiness*. For some, holiness smacks of legalism. They think of it in terms of rules: if you keep the rules, you're holy; if you don't, you're not. That's not what I mean by holiness. For others, holiness refers exclusively to an attribute of God that we don't share. God is holy, but we're not, and we never can be. That's not what I mean either.

As you work through this book, the thing that will keep coming up is this: when human beings are holy, they embody the character of God. Think about it like this: God always does what's right. He always does what he *ought* to do. For us, then, to be holy is to be formed in such a way that we consistently do what we *ought* to do—like God does. And when our lives are transformed in this way, our words and our actions consistently tell the truth about God and his character. Don't you want your life to tell the truth about God's character? I sure do. I want that for both of us.

1

Our Purpose and Our Problem

Genesis 1–3

Then God said, “Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth.”

*So God created humankind in his image,
in the image of God he created them;
male and female he created them.*

God blessed them, and God said to them, “Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth.”

God said, “See, I have given you every plant yielding seed that is upon the face of all the earth, and every tree with seed in its fruit; you shall have them for food.”

—Genesis 1:26–29

It may seem strange to begin this study in Genesis. After all, this book is about holiness, and the word *holy* only appears once in all of Genesis (2:3). And the one time it shows up, it doesn't refer to God or to us. Holiness language doesn't become prominent in the biblical story until halfway through Exodus. So why start with Genesis? Here's the reason: the opening chapters of Genesis are crucial for understanding what it means to be human. And while holiness is one of the chief ways to speak of God, holiness is also very much about experiencing human life in its fullness. Holiness is about God's best for us. And if we skip the opening chapters of the story, our vision of God's design for human life will be deeply impoverished. Genesis introduces themes that will show up again and again as we work through the passages on holiness under consideration in this study. Reading Genesis as a foundation for our study of holiness reminds us that many passages in the Bible deal with holiness without ever mentioning the word *holy*. Concepts that inform our understanding of holiness are often present even when the word is not explicitly stated.

In short, if we want to get the question of holiness right, we need to start with Genesis.

God's Image and Our Purpose

When you read Genesis, you find out right away that people matter to God. That's the climactic point of the creation story in Genesis 1, and it's a point that's made in several ways. Consider first how the creation of human beings breaks the repetition that marks the story of the days of creation. "And God said, 'Let there be . . . And it was so. . . And there was evening and there was morning . . .'" That pattern shows up seven times with little variation in Genesis 1:1–25. It's repetitive. It's predictable. You know it's coming. But suddenly in verse 26, God says something else. Instead of, "Let there be," God says, "Let us make . . ." In every instance up to this point he creates almost casually. Light, sky, earth, stars, trees, fish, birds, everything—he calls for them, and they come into being. But here God doesn't simply call human beings into existence. He pauses. He reflects. He considers the nature and the purpose of his next creative act. That shift—the shift from creative speech to reflective speech—signals a change that calls for the reader to pay attention. It means that the next thing God will make is unlike anything he's made up to that point.

The second signal that human beings are the unique climax of God's creative work comes in the content of his reflective speech. Here God reveals his special plan for humanity. Human beings will carry God's image. This means that every human being—regardless of ethnicity, age, sex, or anything else—is made in the image of God. We've all heard this, but what does it mean and why does it matter? Take a moment to consider how images work. If you were to walk into a pagan temple in the ancient world, you would see a statue of the deity to whom the temple was devoted. That statue—that *image*—represents the presence of the deity. Ancient peoples even had rituals they performed on the eyes and mouth of the statues to activate their representative function. These rituals reveal that the statue wasn't merely a stand-in for the deity. To the contrary, the statue represented the very presence of the deity. Similarly, if you were a king in the ancient world, there would likely be statues of you set up around your kingdom. You may have put them up yourself, or someone else may have erected them as a way of honoring you. Either way, each statue serves as a constant reminder to everyone who sees it that you're the king. It represents your authority. It represents you.

Perhaps this helps us see the significance of being made in God's image. God made us to represent him—to

embody his character and live in ways that reflect the beauty of his glory throughout creation. This also means that every human being has inherent dignity. You were made to represent the one true God, the God who made all things. That means that you matter. And it means that God has placed a great deal of trust in you. In fact, he's entrusted you with his reputation. Now this implies a grave responsibility. If you and I don't live to honor God, it doesn't mean we're no longer representing him. Instead, it means that we're falsely representing him. That, of course, is precisely what happens as the story of Genesis proceeds. A couple of chapters later, we read about Adam's rebellion. Adam didn't stop representing God when he rebelled. He was still made in God's image. He didn't lose that. But he did deform the image of God in himself. With Adam's sin, the image of God that all of us carry was damaged. And our natural ability to represent him well was damaged too. The whole story of the Bible is about what God will do to repair his image in us. If you're interested in knowing what Genesis has to do with holiness, here's a hint: holiness is about embodying the image of God and doing it well. Holiness is about representing God as he ought to be represented. That's his purpose for you and me.

God's Image and Our Character

If you and I are to represent God the way he ought to be represented, then our character must correspond to his character. And while this carries implications for our behavior, it's far deeper than mere behavior. The point is that if I'm to represent God well, then I must *become* a certain kind of person. Once I become that sort of person, then I'll also behave in a way that honors God.

This emerges in Genesis 2:15–17 with the command not to eat the fruit from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Now this passage is easily misunderstood. People often wonder why God would issue such a command knowing its violation would unleash unimaginable evil and suffering into the world. Why should all that wickedness—all that pain!—result from one bite into that one piece of fruit? But that's the point. It wasn't just a piece of fruit. The tree of the knowledge of good and evil presented Adam with the opportunity to live in a way that honored God, to be a person of integrity, and to willingly do good and avoid evil. And apart from the commandment to avoid the fruit of a single tree, there's no way to talk about integrity. There's no other way to speak of right and wrong. There's no other way to begin thinking of holiness.

Pay attention to how the command also reveals something about God's character. We often focus on the one

tree that God forbids. But before forbidding Adam to eat from the one tree, God told him, “You may freely eat of every tree of the garden” (Gen. 2:16). This displays God’s unmatched generosity. The text frames the whole encounter in light of God’s abundant provision. But we tend to focus on that one tree—the one Adam *can’t* have—instead of all the other trees that he *can*.

Imagine that I offered to give you everything I own. You could enjoy it, care for it, and make use of it. The only stipulation is that I want to keep one thing for myself. It’s a pocket watch, and it belonged to my dad. It’s special to me. You can have everything but that. How would you respond? You would likely respond with profound gratitude, praising my generosity and telling others how kind I’d been to you. Never mind one old watch when you can have everything else. You would focus on what I’d *given* you, not on what I’d *kept* from you. And if you did happen to tell someone how I’d stingily kept one thing for myself, you’d appear remarkably ungrateful.

So why do we focus on the one thing God withheld from Adam when we ought to celebrate the generosity God displayed by giving Adam so much? We ought to see the whole scene as an opportunity for Adam to honor God with grateful obedience. After all, that’s what he should’ve done. Do you see how framing the tree and the fruit this way turns our attention to Adam’s character? The tree of

the knowledge of good and evil puts Adam in a position to become the kind of person who gives himself completely to God in love. But for that to be a real option, another option has to be possible too. Adam must also have the option of turning his heart away from God. And that's exactly what happened. Instead of allowing his character to be formed in holiness, Adam allowed his character to be deformed by sin. It's always one or the other. Either we offer ourselves to God and receive his best or we turn from God and lose the good things he offers to us. That's what happened to Adam. He insisted on eating from the one forbidden tree and was consequently exiled from the garden. That means he also lost all the other trees that God had given him. "You may freely eat of every tree in the garden"—that's hard to do when the garden is no longer your home.

God's Mission and Our Holiness

Adam was never supposed to be exiled from the garden, but he *was* always supposed to leave it. Remember that first command, "Be fruitful and multiply, and *fill the earth* and subdue it" (Gen. 1:28, italics added). God always intended for Adam and his children to go out from the garden on a mission to carry God's just, loving, and holy rule to the whole planet. That's what it means to be God's representatives. That's God's mission for his human creatures. But

when Adam sinned, he severely hindered the mission. And when he left the garden, he left under God's judgment rather than with God's blessing.

We need to understand the relationship between holiness and mission. This will come up more than once as we work our way through this study. To depart from the garden in faithful mission under God's global mandate, Adam needed to maintain his relationship with God. He needed to be holy. But when Adam sinned against God, he ruptured his relationship with God, forfeiting his commission and undercutting his objective. His sin stood in the way of his missional purpose.

As this book continues, I hope it becomes clear that holiness is crucial for maximizing missional effectiveness. It's stunningly difficult—perhaps impossible—to fulfil the mission God has entrusted to us if we disregard God's desire that we become holy. If God desires to have a world full of people who embody his character, then the spread of holiness is the mission of the church. Allow this dynamic to frame the way you see the work of Jesus on our behalf. Jesus came to reconcile us to God and bring us back into fellowship with his Father and ours. To accomplish that, our sin had to be dealt with. It had to be forgiven. But forgiveness of sin isn't the ultimate goal. It's the necessary first step to making us holy so that we can fulfill our missional purpose, which is to fill the earth with disciples

who embody the beauty of the character of the triune God. That mission hasn't changed. It remains consistent throughout Scripture. That's why the prophets declare, "the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the LORD, as the waters cover the sea" (Hab. 2:14). That means that the day will come when the earth will be as full of the glory of God as the Atlantic Ocean is with water. When will that be? And how does it happen? The earth will be filled with the knowledge of God's glory when it's filled with people who embody God's character. That's our mission. Adam may have failed, but Jesus succeeded. He died and was raised to make us holy so that we can fulfill that very mission.

Who Gets to Be God?

If we're reading the creation account through the lens of *holiness*, then another question comes up: namely, the question of authority. Who gets to be God? We've already noticed that Adam had been given significant authority—*global authority*. But his authority wasn't unlimited, and it did not originate in him. Instead, it was a gift. It came to him from God. And that made Adam's authority different from God's authority. God's authority is universal; Adam's

authority, though significant, was limited. God's authority originates from his nature; Adam's authority was delegated to him by God. The command not to eat from that one tree was to serve as a constant reminder of this. It was to serve as a reminder of the limits of Adam's authority, which was never absolute.

So when Adam ate the forbidden fruit, he went beyond the bounds of his authority. His action said to God, "I don't acknowledge your authority. I insist on being my own authority. I insist on my own absolute and universal rule. And I don't care what you think about it." Adam took for himself the authority that belonged God. There's another name for attitudes and behaviors that take what rightfully belongs to God only to offer it to someone or something else. It's called idolatry. At its root, Adam's sin was idolatry. By refusing to obey God, he refused to worship God. He insisted on elevating himself, his preferences, and his desires. All of that should open our eyes to the relationship between holiness and worship. False worship (or idolatry) corrupts holiness, undermines it, and darkens it. In contrast, true worship cultivates holiness. Once again, we'll see this relationship come up elsewhere in the Bible. For now, let's understand that apart from the true worship of the one true God, there is no holiness.

From Worship to Holiness to Mission

Let's conclude this introductory chapter by restating this foundational claim. True worship cultivates the holiness necessary for faithful mission. If Adam had allowed God to remain as the highest authority, worshipping God and obeying him, then Adam would have continued growing in holiness, and he would have left the garden with God's favor to rule the whole earth as God's representative. But he didn't. He became idolatrous. Refusing to give God the worship that only God deserves, Adam fell from holiness into sin, and with the image of God in him damaged, he left the garden, not on a mission to fill the world with the beauty of the rule of God, but under God's condemnation. These three things belong together: worship, holiness, and mission. If we lose any one of them, we are in danger of losing all three.

Questions for Reflection and Discussion

1. What was your understanding of holiness before beginning this study?
2. Have you ever met anyone who seemed particularly holy to you? What made them seem that way?
3. What aspects of God's character are revealed in the creation narrative of Genesis 1–2?
4. Does the statement “Worship cultivates holiness” impact your attitude toward the importance of worship in your local church?
5. What are some specific ways you can become more involved in the church's mission?

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This is a solid treatment as to what real holiness, which God expects of his people, is all about. Highly recommended.

— DR. BEN WITHERINGTON III

Amos Professor of New Testament for Doctoral Studies, Asbury Theological Seminary

Matt O'Reilly's book helps reorient misguided conversations to remind readers that holiness is about sharing in and embodying the divine character of the triune God in our daily lives.

— TAMMIE GRIMM

Associate Professor of Congregational Formation, Wesley Seminary (Marion, Indiana)

This will be a helpful book to put in the hands of the nominal Christian who does not recognize the possibility and the earnest Christian who wants to go deeper but does not know how. Warmly recommended.

— JOHN N. OSWALT

Visiting Distinguished Professor of Old Testament, Asbury Theological Seminary

Much of the gospel you may have heard centers around hope for the next life, freedom from guilt and condemnation, and forgiveness of sin. But what does the Bible teach us about *freedom* from sin? Or deliverance from the things that produce guilt rather than the guilt itself? *Free to Be Holy* illuminates the other half of the gospel and explores an element of the biblical story that is often forgotten—holiness for this life.

For Christians, the word *holy* carries weight. It is a touchstone for daily life, a reminder to center around Jesus rather than the world. Striving for a holy life can feel like a constant chase toward something unattainable, but there is another way to approach holiness. In this book, Dr. O'Reilly uses Scripture to guide readers through what God wants for us: perfect love and becoming fully human. Along the way, he shows that holiness has more to do with embodying God's character in order to faithfully represent him in mission to the world. Each chapter ends with intentional questions for reflection and discussion, allowing the reader to engage deeper with themselves and in fellowship.

MATT O'REILLY (PhD, Gloucestershire) is lead pastor of Christ Church Birmingham in Alabama, director of research at Wesley Biblical Seminary, and a fellow of the Center for Pastor Theologians. He is the author of *Paul and the Resurrected Body: Social Identity and Ethical Practice* (SBL Press) and *The Letters to the Thessalonians* (Seedbed).

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