Holy Is a Four-Letter Word responds to the need for an accessible and simple articulation of the holy life, and what it means for the collective church as well as for individual believers. This goal is accomplished by taking the fundamental tenants of holiness doctrine and shaping them around twelve four-letter words: (1) Holy, (2) Self, (3) Full, (4) Pure, (5) Will, (6) Mind, (7) Body, (8) Love, (9) Rest, (10) Life, (11) Sent, and (12) Call. Each chapter deals with holy living according to scripture as it pertains to each four-letter word.

“The clear command for holiness conveyed through the Bible is demanding and intimidating, but it is also a command with great promise. In Holy Is a Four-Letter Word, we are shown how this command has daily application in essentially every area of life. And, we rejoice in the promise as we understand that holiness is not about our accomplishment, but rather what God will accomplish in us as we draw near to him.”

—DAVID LONG, Vice President of Theological Education, One Mission Society

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Holy Is a Four-Letter Word
Holy Is a Four-Letter Word
How to Live a Holy Life in an Unholy World

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CONTENTS

Introduction • 1

1 HOLY • 6
2 SELF • 13
3 FULL • 22
4 PURE • 32
5 WILL • 42
6 MIND • 50
7 BODY • 59
8 LOVE • 69
9 REST • 81
10 LIFE • 91
11 SENT • 101
12 CALL • 110

Bibliography • 119
INTRODUCTION

As a linguist, I (Matt) spend a lot of time thinking about language and how it works. One of the subdisciplines of linguistic study is semantics. Semantics, generally speaking, is the study of meaning. A dictionary is a result of semantic study because dictionaries are concerned solely about what words mean, or signify. The word dog, for example, is a sign that refers to those domesticated, four-legged, furry animals also known as "man's best friend." Easy, right? But what happens when dad comes home after a long, hard day of work, kicks off his new boots and moans, "Boy, my dogs sure are barkin!"? Dogs, in this case, means "feet."

This is a perfect exercise in semantics that helps us to see that a word's meaning is determined by their context. This example also demonstrates for us that words can have multiple meanings. Dictionaries testify to this. Thorough dictionaries will list more than one meaning for any given word with the most frequent use of the word listed first.

Take the word trunk as another example. Trunk can signify the storage area of a car (usually found at the back), a chest or box used for dry storage (usually found at the foot of a bed), the base of a tree that connects the branches to the roots, or the nose of an elephant (usually found at the front of an elephant). The first two definitions are obviously related; they both store things. The third and forth are also related in that they are both typically thick and long (physical characteristics). The point is that a single word can mean a variety of related, or unrelated, things (although the variety of meanings are usually related in some way).

But what about the word holy? What if we were to look up the word holy in a dictionary? The Oxford English Dictionary (OED), which
HOLY IS A FOUR-LETTER WORD

is accepted as the authoritative, and exhaustive, dictionary of the English Language, defines holy as,

Kept or regarded as inviolate from ordinary use, and appropriated or set apart for religious use or observance; consecrated, dedicated, sacred.¹

This is the most common use of the word. It, like all other words, has other meanings as well, however, it can primarily be understood as a synonym for sacred.

At this point, let me point out that there is another use for dictionaries. My wife and I keep a dictionary nearby when playing Scrabble. While playing Scrabble, we’re not concerned with what words mean (semantics) as much as how they are spelled (which is another subdiscipline of linguistics called orthography). Dictionaries not only keep a record of meaning, but also correct spelling.

Have you ever noticed that the word h-o-l-y has four letters? Holy is a four-letter word! Wikipedia defines the phrase “four-letter words” as, “referring to a set of English-language words written with four letters which are considered profane . . .”²

It is quite ironic that holy is a four-letter word! The irony is found in the fact that holy means the opposite of profane. The verb profane means, “to treat (something sacred) with irreverence, disrespect, or contempt.”³

In short, holy, while having four letters, is an antonym (i.e. opposite) of a “four-letter word.”

In light of all of this, Jesus made a habit out of turning things on their head (recapitulation). He would challenge the way people thought by redefining things by their antonyms (opposites). Take power, for example. Humans define power as "strength", might, and "potency" (among a series of other synonyms). Jesus, however, says power is weakness, submission, and inability. What? But weakness is the opposite of power!

Furthermore, we have the example of Jesus teaching us that if you want to live, you must die (Matt 10:39); or, if you want to be first, you must be last (Mark 10:34). There is a degree of irony in each of these.

In this same vein of irony, this book sets out to describe the holy life using four-letter words. We will speak more to this in a moment.

¹ OED online, s.v. "holy."
² Wikipedia, s.v. "Four-Letter Word."
³ OED online, s.v. "profane."
INTRODUCTION

PROFANITY, POSTMODERNITY, AND THE CALL TO HOLINESS

Humans have this bizarre tendency to desecrate the sacred. There is something perverse in the depths of the human heart that despises purity. Undoubtedly, the weight of sin-guilt makes the human heart bitter and resentful toward those who are free from its chains. This reality is manifest in the cultural phenomenon of profanity.

This point is made evident in a variety of profane words in the English language. Have you ever noticed that profane words are rarely more than desecrating the sacred? The words that make us cringe, that are uttered in fierce rage and moments of carnal human passion, are those words that tend to be associated with the pure.

There is something else happening, however, in contemporary Western culture that is more threatening than the desecration of the sacred. There is a recent trend to deny the very existence of anything sacred. That is, in marching in step with postmodernity, the voice of secular humanist culture says, "Everything is the same. There is no sacred and profane; there is no good or bad. Everything, in the end, is relative."4

This sort of posture is a greater threat because of its subtlety. At first glance it is not as shocking as profanity, or overtly evil, but evil it is. It is, in fact, the source of corruption and decay in the world. This sort of thinking is no different than what we find in Genesis 3 where we read the account of the origin of sin in the world. Adam and Eve, like much of the postmodern Western world, decide on their own that good and evil are relative. Yes, God has declared what was right and wrong (it is wrong to eat of the tree), but that is God’s definition of good and evil. Eve, in being persuaded by the serpent, decides that if God can have his definition of good and evil, then so can she. She sees that the fruit is good even though God has declared that it’s not good. This is moral autonomy; deciding on one’s own what is good and bad. This is the source of death in the world. Leave God to his own self and let him leave me to mine.

This sort of thinking seriously compromises the scriptural call to holiness in the life of the believer. In fact, it eliminates the biblical concept of holiness altogether.

4. The self-defeating nature of these propositions simultaneously invalidates them, by the way.
HOLY IS A FOUR-LETTER WORD

The time seems more appropriate than ever to reexamine and reorientize the importance of holiness in the life of the church. But perhaps we shy away from the concept of holy altogether because we are not sure we could ever attain such a level of right living (with the help of the Holy Spirit). It intimidates us. Surely God didn’t really mean what he said when he said, “Be holy, as I am holy.” Because of our human failures, we do interpretive acrobats to find alternative interpretations to the plain meaning of the text to match what we wish to read. For example, we interpret this to be a hyperbole, an exaggeration for the sake of the argument. This interpretation loses its validity based on the fact that there are no other hyperbolic commands in the Scriptures (that the authors are aware of). Beyond this, to propose that God would command his people to do something they were incapable of would be to question both his justice and his kindness (which are both extensions of his love and holiness). The Father doesn’t challenge his children to strive to attain goals that are out of their reach. More than this, the call to holiness is much more a reflection of God’s capacity to work in the life of a believer than the human capacity of achievement.

Let us replace our human failures as our framework for biblical interpretation with Christ’s victory. Let us stand not in the fallenness of Adam when we read God’s commands, but rather in the risenness of Christ! When we do this, we can begin to take the command to be holy seriously.

REDEEMING THE PROFANE: HOLINESS THROUGH FOUR-LETTER WORDS

But how do we live a holy life in a world that is more and more ambiguous on right and wrong with each passing day? It is our contention that the way to be holy can become clearer through the understanding of a series of, yes you guessed it, four-letter words, one negative and then several positive ones.

One of my favorite stories from the gospels is when the leper comes to Jesus for healing (Mark 8). As a rabbi and teacher of the law it was imperative that Jesus not touch lepers. According to the Torah, coming in contact with leprosy made one unclean and ineligible to partake in sacred activity (like teaching the Torah). This means that when Jesus touched the leper in the story he did something very taboo. In other words, by touching the leper, he broke social norms in a deep way.
INTRODUCTION

What Jesus' disciples didn't understand, however, was that things that touch Jesus do not make Jesus unclean. Much to the contrary, when things or people touch Jesus, they become clean! Jesus redeems that which he comes in contact with. This same principle is true in the story of Jesus' death. When Jesus comes into contact with death, he redeems it. In Jesus, then, death is not a curse, but the way to life. As Christians we can celebrate death, rather than fear it. Thanks be to Jesus!

What is the significance of this for us here? Jesus wishes to redeem four-letter words and this book is out to prove it by offering a simple guide to holy living using four-letter words. Each chapter will treat the topic of holiness and how it intersects with our daily living, all centered on a four-letter word.

It is necessary to start with the negative (as was common rabbinic teaching practice during Jesus’ day). We need to understand that “sin” is a four-letter word. Obviously, that will need some explanation. We haven’t forgotten how to count! Understanding “sin” as a four-letter word, we need to move on to the positive with such words as “holy,” “full,” “pure,” “will,” “mind,” “body,” “rest,” “life,” “sent,” and “call”; and we certainly can’t forget “love,” which in many ways sums up the entire journey.

There is yet another way of clarifying the way to holy living. Paul challenged the Ephesian believers to “address one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs” (Eph 5:19). Christians often sing a better theology than they believe or live. That great theology is often contained in the music of the church, which is why each chapter will end with a psalm, hymn or spiritual song. They are included for the reader to have a time of meditation to reflect on the depths of truth they contain in hopes of better understanding what it means to be holy.

Paul admonished Timothy to “give attention to reading [of the Word of God], to exhortation [challenging the people], and to doctrine [the teachings of the church].” He challenged him to “meditate on these things, give yourself wholly to them; that your profiting may appear to all” (1 Tim 4:13–15, KJV). It would do well for all of us to heed that challenge.

Let’s begin by making sure we understand our objective . . . a holy lifestyle.
HOLY

... be holy, because I am holy! —Isaiah 35:8

Grandparenting is awesome. Watching our grandsons, Kyle, Cole, and Luke grow has been one of life's greatest joys. Learning to talk is one of the most fascinating stages of a child's development. Learning a new sound each week, one of our grandsons came to the “t” sound. Quickly he picked up words like “toys,” “truck,” and when we cleaned off the table at a restaurant, “trash.”

Our plan was that he would call me “Papaw” and his grandmother “Mamaw.” Watching him struggle with her name, my wife said, “I don't care what he calls me as long as it is not a four-letter word.” We don't know how he learned it, but all of a sudden he started calling her “Nana.”

One of my wife's desires was for her grandson to say her name before mine (a little family rivalry). Soon after she heard him call her “Nana” for the first time, I joined the family at a local restaurant. My wife couldn't wait to tell me he had said her name first. To prove he really could say her name, I asked him what her name was, and he quickly responded, “Trash.” Far worse than some four-letter words!

This reminds me of an important part of thinking about holiness, and that is that holiness is about God first and foremost, and not about us. Isaiah reminds us of this when he says, “All our righteous acts are like filthy
HOLY

rags; we all shrivel up like a leaf, and like the wind our sins sweep us away” (Isa 64:6a, NIV; italics added). After all, the command to be holy is ultimately more about what God is capable of accomplishing than about human achievement. In other words, the command to be holy does not speak to human performance, but to God’s perfection.

LIVING IN AN UNHOLY WORLD

I (Charles) recently had the A/C repairman at my house. As much as I appreciated his service, it rubbed me a bit that his language was laced with profanity. He didn’t know I was a full-time minister and was somewhat embarrassed when he later asked what I did for a living. The casual manner in which he used such strong language is sadly indicative of the growing presence of profanity in the public sector and media.

In October 2011, a USA Today headline read, “@$#! What are publishers doing?” The subtitle read, “Musicians do it. So does Broadway.” The article commented that now more books add profanity to titles, and they sell because of it. “For publishers, ‘sell’ is a four-letter word. What used to be profane is becoming prevalent—and very profitable.”

The article also cited three songs on Billboard’s Hot 100 chart with a common four-letter word in the title. A recent Broadway play starring comedic superstar Chris Rock bore the same four-letter word. A recent bestselling book repeats the same word. The book’s editor commented to critics, “It’s a book for adults who have heard these words. If you don’t like it, don’t buy it. Books have a lot to compete with these days.”

It is not at all uncommon, then, that in a broken and decaying world we have much more exposure to harsh language than language that is pure, lovely, gentle, kind, loving, edifying, up-lifting, and, well . . . holy. Not only this, but also in a broken world, positive language that flows from a healthy and fresh well of sweet, life-giving water, is sometimes considered taboo. Eric Metaxas, author of the best-selling biography of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, rightly expresses that “everyone seems to be afraid to say, ‘That’s wrong,’ for fear of being called a prude.”

The Bible teaches that a person’s words either acquit or condemn him; that the words of our mouths proceed from our hearts. Jesus himself

1. See Donahue, “For Publishers.”
2. Ibid.
3. Ibid.
HOLY IS A FOUR-LETTER WORD

instructs us, “Out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks” (Matt 12:34b). The implication here is that profane language deceives its user; it reveals the brokenness out of which profanity flows. What a story four-letter words can tell on us.

So then, to orient our thinking about holiness, it’s only appropriate that we begin with the character of God himself.

IT ALL BEGINS WITH A HOLY GOD

When the Israelites had crossed the Red Sea and witnessed the great, redemptive power of God, they sang, “Who is like you, O Lord, among the gods? Who is like you, majestic in holiness, awesome in glorious deeds, doing wonders?” (Exod 15:11). God is different. He is set apart. This is one of the key meanings that must be centrally placed in our thinking about the word holy; otherness.

There are many features of God’s nature that make him different. In this particular text, the emphasis is God’s otherness in his ability to redeem humanity. The gods of the ancient Near Eastern pantheon offered false hope. Their gods were just like humans! They lied, cheated, stole, and their future was left to fate. This is diametrically opposed to Yahweh Elohim, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. The God of the patriarchs, unlike the idols of the world, is good, reliable, loving, just, and honest, and his future is left to none. His existence is independent from all other beings (the Judeo-Christian doctrine of transcendence). This is one of the reasons why he is called “I Am.” It is because he is set apart so that he is able to offer a new reality to his people. He can offer the hope of a different future that isn’t marked by the fate of death for all. His people are to share in His life. They are to be holy.

Furthermore, one of the unforgettable features of the story of the prophet’s vision in Isaiah 6 is the trifold, “Holy! Holy! Holy!” refrain of the seraphim’s worship song (Isa 6:3). This was repeated when John saw the four living creatures in his vision on the Isle of Patmos, “And the four living creatures, each of them with six wings, are full of eyes all around and within, and day and night they never cease to say, ‘Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord God Almighty, who was and is and is to come!’” (Rev 4:8).

The Bible throughout attests to the holiness of God. Holy is the word that the Bible uses to express all that is distinctive and transcendent in the revealed nature and character of the Creator, all that brings home to us the
HOLY

infinite distance and difference that there is between him and ourselves. Holiness in this sense means quite comprehensively, the “Godness” of God, everything about him, which sets him apart from humanity.

He is different, He is set apart.

GOD’S CALL FOR A HOLY PEOPLE

As an extension of his holiness, God calls Israel to be both a holy people and a holy nation (Exod 19:6a). Israel’s story as recorded in the Old Testament, however, is a tragedy. The prophetic literature (as well as the historical books) is centrally characterized by the unifying theme of judgment for a rebellious people. They failed to respond to the call to share in God’s nature (more on calling as holiness in ch. 12). They were to be set apart, they were to be different from the broken pagan world, and the Torah (the first five books of the Bible) was their handbook for life. Sadly, they rebelled by violating the Torah and fell right into line with the ways of the pagan world around them.

The new covenant was to respond to this tragedy, as promised by the prophets. The call to holiness doesn’t change from the Old Testament to the New. What does change is that because of universal access to the indwelling of the Holy Spirit (made possible through the substitutionary death of Jesus), the people of God can truly respond to his powerful sanctifying work within us based on our faith in Jesus. This means that even today God is seeking to share his nature with us so that we might be made holy, as he is holy. Peter commands his readers, “But as he who called you is holy, you also be holy in all your conduct, since it it written, ‘You shall be holy, for I am holy’” (1 Pet 1:15–16).

This means that holy living flows from being dissociated from sinful practices and being devoted to the life of Godlikeness; to be other than.

THE WORD “HOLY” IN THE WORD OF GOD

The Bible speaks of the holy name of God. The Scriptures and the Sabbath are also referred to as “holy.” Additionally, in Bible times there were holy places. God’s ways were also called holy. Most important of all, God is holy, and he wants us to be holy as well.

That he wants us to be holy is well established in the Scriptures in these phrases:
HOLY IS A FOUR-LETTER WORD

For I am the Lord your God. Consecrate yourselves therefore, and be holy for I am holy. (Lev 11:44a)

I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. (Rom 12:1)

. . . who saved us and called us to a holy calling, not because of our works but because of his own purpose and grace, which he gave us in Christ Jesus before the ages began . . . (2 Tim 1:9)

. . . but as he who called you is holy, you also be holy in all your conduct, since it is written, “You shall be holy, for I am holy.” (1 Pet 1:15–16)

In the Old Testament, the words “holy” and "holiness" occur more than 830 times. The Hebrew word that the ESV translates “holy” is qadosh, which means, "holy, sacred, consecrated, set apart as dedicated to God; by extension: pure, innocent, free from impurity; (n.)(as a noun) holy people of God, saints; as a title of God, 'the Holy One' focuses on God as unique, wholly other.”4 In sum, it signifies God's separation from his creation (not spatial, but transcendent) and his spotless character.

When applied to people, it signifies their ceremonial sanctity issuing from appropriate acts of consecration. Occasionally, at a deeper level of significance, it refers to their ethical righteousness. It speaks of separation and consecration; separation from what is common or unclean, consecration to what is sacred and pure.

In the New Testament, the word carries forward and completes the spiritual-ethical aspect of sanctity in the Old Testament. Specifically, it refers to the imparted holiness that comes as the result of a believer's union with Christ.

And because of him you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God, righteousness and sanctification and redemption. (1 Cor 1:30)

Believers, who through the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit, share Christ's nature and submit to his lordship, possess a moral quality of character and actions. Thus, they are holy in the NT sense.

4. Koehler and Baumgartner, Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon, s.v. “qadosh.”
HOLY

But now that you have been set free from sin and have become slaves to God, the fruit you get leads to sanctification and its end, eternal life. (Rom 6:22)

LIVING A HOLY LIFE

But is a life of personal holiness attainable? The psalmist asks, “Who shall ascend the hill of the Lord? And who shall stand in his holy place?” (Ps 24:3). We also find comfort in the words of Jude, “Now to him who is able to keep you from stumbling and to present you blameless before the presence of his glory with great joy…” (Jude 24).

When people truly confront the holiness of God, their reaction will be similar to that of Isaiah who said, “Woe is me! For I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts!” (Isa 6:5). Meditating on his holiness, we become aware not only of our own uncleanness but also the uncleanness of the world around us, just as Isaiah did.

A young man who began confessing that he had committed his life to Christ was asked what evidence he had that Christ truly had accepted his prayer of repentance. His response was simple but yet profound, “For the first time in my life I felt clean.” Can we even imagine a holy nation, a country that bows before a holy God and holds to a conviction that a basic holiness permeates things and people; a country void of air pollution and sexual immorality; a country that celebrates the sanctity of sex and the joy of treating one another with behavior that honors a holy God?

The Lord commands us to “be holy as I am holy.” Is such a life attainable? If so, how is it attained? This is a controversial topic indeed. Let God’s Word answer that question for us with four-letter words in the chapters that follow.

SOME QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

1. What evidences of unholy living do you witness on a daily basis?
2. What do you see or hear that pollutes rather than purifies?
3. Do any of those evidences exist in your lifestyle?
5. Do you really believe that a holy life is possible? How committed are you to living a holy life?

A HYMN FOR MEDITATION: HOLY, HOLY, HOLY, LORD GOD ALMIGHTY

Holy, holy, holy! Lord God Almighty! Early in the morning our song shall rise to Thee; Holy, holy, holy, merciful and mighty! God in Three Persons, blessed Trinity!

Holy, holy, holy! All the saints adore Thee, Casting down their golden crowns around the glassy sea; Cherubim and seraphim falling down before Thee, Which wert, and art, and evermore shalt be.

Holy, holy, holy! Though the darkness hide Thee, Though the eye of sinful man Thy glory may not see; Only Thou art holy; there is none beside Thee, Perfect in power, in love, and purity.

Holy, holy, holy! Lord God Almighty! All Thy works shall praise Thy Name, in earth, and sky, and sea; Holy, holy, holy, merciful and mighty! God in Three Persons, blessed Trinity! And the four beasts had each of them six wings about him; and they were full of eyes within: and they rest not day and night, saying, Holy, holy, holy, Lord God Almighty, which was, and is, and is to come (Rev 4:8).

Reginald Heber (1783–1826) was a Bishop in the Church of England. He wrote the hymn *Holy, Holy, Holy, Lord God Almighty* in 1826 for the celebration of Trinity Sunday. Trinity Sunday celebrates the Christian doctrine of the Trinity; the three-in-one personage of God: the Father, the Son (God incarnate in Jesus Christ) and the Holy Spirit. It is scheduled on the first Sunday after Pentecost in the Western Christian liturgical calendar, and on the Sunday of Pentecost in Eastern Christianity.

After Heber’s unexpected death at age forty-three, his wife found the song among some of his writings and passed it on to noted musician John B. Dykes (1823–1876), who composed and arranged the hymn for publication. Dykes composed the tune *Nicaea* for this hymn in 1861. The tune name is a tribute to the First Council of Nicaea, which formalized the doctrine of the Trinity in AD 325.
SELF

There is no holiness without humility, and indeed, some spiritual masters are convinced that in the end there is only one threat to holiness: pride—specifically the pride of self-autonomy and self-dependence.

—Gordon T. Smith, *Call to the Saints*

In 1981 Pat Riley wrote about the downfall of his team, the New York Knicks, “They failed to become a dynasty because they suffered from the disease of me.”¹ There is basically only one hindrance to the living of a holy life and that obstacle is *sin*, and at the root of sin is human pride, *the disease of me*.

Sin is the bitter result of pride. It is our unwillingness to be radically dependent upon God. Pride is the vice from which all others flow. By its very nature and presence, it not only destroys humility but all other virtues simultaneously. Sin is essentially the selfishness of the individual in relation to God and others, and pride is the inordinate assertion of self.

At the fall, recorded in Genesis 3, self took God’s rightful place on the throne and as a result, humanity has struggled with it ever since. In his book *Paul, Envoy Extraordinaire*, Malcolm Muggeridge, writes:

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HOLY IS A FOUR-LETTER WORD

It is precisely when you consider the best in man that you see there is in each of us a hard core of pride or self-centeredness which corrupts our best achievements and blights our best experiences.²

That corruption flies in the face of any sense of a holy lifestyle. Muggeridge went on to explain some of the ways humanity’s self-centeredness expresses itself:

In the jealousy which spoils our friendships, in the vanity we feel when we have done something pretty good, in the easy conversion of love into lust, in the meanness which makes us deprecate the efforts of other people, in the distortion of our own judgment, our own self-interest, in our fondness for flattery and our resentment of blame, in our self-assertive profession of fine ideals which we never begin to practice.³

The word “holy” would never fit in a list of words such as jealousy, vanity, lust, meanness, self-interest, and resentment.

The self-life often manifests itself in a secret spirit of pride, love of human praise, stirrings of anger and impatience, self-will, a jealous disposition, and overall selfishness. And selfishness affects the most valuable relationships of our lives.

Selfishness can be blamed as the major enemy of marriage and of love within the family. Selfishness is hypocritical. While falsely appearing to have many benefits, it actually turns the person in upon himself and interferes with healthy self-giving which is the essence of marital love. Selfishness causes significant pain and suffering in marriages and families. It is a major cause of marital anger, permissive parenting, addictive behaviors, infidelity, separation and ultimately divorce. Unless it is addressed, selfishness leads spouses to treat loved ones as objects and not as valuable persons.

Today’s cultural view of marriage is radically different than the biblical view. Today, a spouse’s responsibility is not to the meeting of the needs of spouse and family but to finding personal fulfillment and happiness in the relationship. Love is defined more in terms of the emotional and erotic rather than the self-giving. Divorce is made easy and the way out appears as a better option than working through the difficulties that selfishness creates. The beautiful reality is that God is much more concerned with our holiness than our happiness.

3. Ibid.