

Holiness Is Not Contagious, But Sin Is

Why you can't make anyone holy by hanging around them, and who can

Do not be deceived: "Evil company corrupts good habits."

1 CORINTHIANS 15:33

AT A GLANCE

BIG IDEA	Holiness doesn't rub off on people, but sin does. Holiness is a gift God gives to those who trust Jesus. That shapes how we choose close friends and how we reach out to people who need Him.
SCRIPTURE	Haggai 2:11-14 · 1 Corinthians 15:33 · Proverbs 13:20 · 2 Corinthians 5:21 · Hebrews 10:10 · Mark 1:40-42 · Mark 5:25-34
LENGTH	About 20 minutes
BEST FOR	Middle school and high school
YOU WILL NEED	A clean white shirt or towel and a little mud or dirt in a cup (or a clean glass of water and food coloring)

Start here: which one spreads?

Hold up a clean white towel and a cup of mud. Ask: "If I rub the clean towel on the mud, what happens?" (The towel gets dirty.) "If I rub the mud with the clean towel, does the mud get clean?" (No.) Dirt spreads to clean things. Clean doesn't spread to dirt.

That's a picture of a principle God taught His people long ago: **holiness is not contagious, but sin is.**

1 God's object lesson in Haggai

About 520 B.C., God's people had returned from exile and were rebuilding the temple. God told the prophet Haggai to ask the priests two questions about the Law (Haggai 2:11-13):

- If someone carries holy meat from a sacrifice in his robe, and the robe touches bread or wine or oil, does that food become holy? The priests answered, "**No.**"
- If someone who is unclean from touching a dead body touches any of these, does it become unclean? The priests answered, "**It shall be unclean.**"

Then God made His point: the people thought being near the temple and offering sacrifices made them holy, but their hearts were far from Him, so everything they touched was unclean (2:14). Being close to holy things doesn't make you holy. But sin spreads to everything it touches.

BACKGROUND FOR THE LEADER

Under the Law of Moses, holiness came from God's presence and His appointed sacrifices, and it couldn't be passed along by contact. Uncleaness, however, spread easily (see Leviticus 11-15; Numbers 19). God used these everyday rules to teach a spiritual truth: sin defiles, and only God can make something holy.

2 Sin spreads

"Do not be deceived: 'Evil company corrupts good habits.'" **1 CORINTHIANS 15:33**

Paul was quoting a well-known saying of his day, and it's still true. You can't "infect" people with goodness just by being around them, but bad habits, attitudes, and language spread fast. "He who walks with wise men will be wise, but the companion of fools will be destroyed" (Proverbs 13:20).

Think about it: Does one friend's bad attitude spread through a group faster than another friend's good attitude? Does gossip move faster than encouragement? That's the principle at work.

3 Holiness is a gift

If holiness can't rub off on us, where does it come from? It is a gift from God, received by trusting Jesus.

"For He made Him who knew no sin to be sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him." **2 CORINTHIANS 5:21**

On the cross, Jesus took our sin, and He gives us His righteousness in exchange. "We have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all" (Hebrews 10:10).

Righteousness comes by faith, not by effort or by association (Romans 3:22). And the Holy Spirit, who lives in every believer, keeps growing that holiness in us day by day (2 Thessalonians 2:13).

That means you can't become holy by sitting in church, wearing a cross, or having Christian parents. And you can't make your friends holy by hanging out with them. Holiness must be received from God.

4 The one exception: Jesus

Here is the amazing part. When a man with leprosy came to Jesus, Jesus touched him (Mark 1:41). By the Law, touching a leper made a person unclean. But Jesus didn't become unclean; the leper became clean! When a woman who had been bleeding for twelve years touched His clothes, she was healed (Mark 5:25-34). Jesus' holiness is the only holiness strong enough to overcome uncleanness.

That's why the gospel is such good news. We can't clean ourselves or anyone else, but Jesus can make anyone clean.

So what about my friends?

Jesus spent time with "tax collectors and sinners" (Luke 15:1-2), and He calls us to love people who don't know Him. But He went to them as the Holy One who changes others, not as someone who would be changed by them. Here is how that works for us:

Choose your closest friends wisely

Your inner circle shapes you more than you shape it. Make sure your closest friends are pulling you toward Jesus.

Reach out with your eyes open

Be kind to everyone, include the left-out, and build friendships with unbelievers, but know who is influencing whom.

Point to Jesus, not yourself

Your goodness won't save your friends. Pray for them and tell them about the One who can make them clean.

Know when to step back

If a friendship keeps pulling you into sin, it's not ministry anymore. Get help from a leader and set boundaries.

TALK IT OVER

1. Why do you think dirt spreads to clean things but not the other way around? How is sin like that?
2. What did God want His people to learn from the questions in Haggai 2?
3. Have you ever seen a bad attitude or habit spread through a group? What happened?
4. If holiness is a gift, what does that mean for someone who is trying hard to be "good enough" for God?
5. How can we love and reach out to friends who don't know Jesus without being pulled into sin?

TAKE IT HOME

Make two lists this week. On one, write the names of your three closest friends and ask, "Are we pulling each other toward Jesus?" On the other, write the names of two people who need Jesus. Pray for them every day, and ask God for a chance to point them to the only One whose holiness can make them clean.

We can't make anyone clean. Jesus can make anyone clean.

From fifty years of youth ministry by **Ron Whittam**. Share freely with your students and leaders. · The Youth Ministry Living Room · qrprogramming.com/livingroom

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