

Mostly around the 16th Century, monasteries like these popped up all over Europe. The monastic lifestyle, was a life of separation from the world – a life of Christian community – a life of prayer and reflection... (without, of course, the possibility of those pesky unwelcomed visitors)....

To get into these places, the residents had to lower a rope ladder, for you to climb up... I don't think they would have had too many of their neighbours popping in for a yarn, or to borrow a cup of sugar....

It's strange, how people who took on the name of Christ, built these sorts of places, when that's not at all, what Christ ever intended for us.

And I just show you these pictures, because, well we mightn't live in a stone fortress on the top of a cliff, but many of **us** cut **ourselves** off, just as much, from those who really need to have, the company of Christians.

You see, it's very easy, for a Christian to become like a Pharisee was in Jesus' day.... A Pharisee was “a separated one” – that's what the word “Pharisee” means... They so much, wanted to be “holy”, that they separated themselves off, from anyone or any thing, that might make them unclean...:

- Oh, you probably don't tithe. I'd better not spend time with you.

- You don't wash your hands properly before you eat – I can't eat at the same table as you.
- You? You're a tax collector – you work for the gentiles – I can't even be in the same building as you...

They separated themselves off – their intentions were probably generally good – they wanted to be holy – but they went about it all the wrong way. For them, it was all about satisfying religious traditions, and they missed the whole point... The point is, we should be striving for godliness... Being separated from the profane does not make someone holy... Godliness, is what makes someone holy, and Godliness comes from God, and it includes “mercy”... And they missed the “mercy” part, completely...

And just like the Pharisees, it's all too easy for us Christians, to separate **ourselves** off from the world. We mightn't do it intentionally – we certainly don't do it with malice, but it just happens. You see, when you become a Christian, you'll want to hang out with other Christians.

When you become a Christian, all of a sudden, priorities in your life begin to change (have you noticed that?). If your relationship with God is healthy:

- You'll want to go to church
- You'll want to go to bible study
- You'll want to get involved in some Christian fellowship groups

When your relationship with God is healthy,

- You'll crave the word of God – to read it, and you'll crave Godly teaching...
- You might get involved in various Christian ministries
- The people you enjoy spending time with, will increasingly become other Christians..

That's natural – It's the sign of a healthy relationship with God... And as **we** strive for holiness, often we find **ourselves** becoming increasingly distant from the world.

But the problem is, we Christians seem to have a way of Christianising everything. We've probably got more trouble doing it in a small town, but you go to a big city, and you can just about satisfy all of your needs, through Christian organisations

- Christian schools
- Christian hospitals
- Christian coffee shops
- Christian financial planners
- Christian book shops
- Christian clubs
- Christian sports competitions
- Christian gyms
- And it just goes on and on and on...

Now none of these things are bad, but be aware, that the more we get involved in such things, the more increasingly distant we become to sinners. Now, think for a moment about **your** circle of friends... How many of them are not Christians?

Jesus said, **"It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick.**

And He said this, because the Pharisees had just asked His disciples, "Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and 'sinners'?" ... (Why isn't he separating himself?)

"It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. ¹³ But go and learn what this means: 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice.' For I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners."

When Jesus said **'I desire mercy, not sacrifice.'**, the word "sacrifice" was referring to religious tradition. He wasn't at all against living a sacrificial life – that is giving up home, possessions, family, money, status – whatever it takes – because Jesus taught time and time again, that a sacrificial life was critical for His disciples - ^{Matthew 16:24} ... **"If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. ²⁵ For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will find it.** He's talking about a sacrificial life, and a sacrificial life, is critical for those who would follow Jesus – it's critical for you and I....

When Jesus said **'I desire mercy, not sacrifice.'**, He was quoting the prophet Hosea ^{Hosea 6:6} **For I desire mercy, not sacrifice,**
and acknowledgment of God rather than burnt offerings.

You see, Hosea was writing to a people who would break God's law (lie, cheat, steal, kill), and then think that offering a sacrifice would make it all ok... He was talking about the keeping of religious tradition, without a loving relationship with God and with others...

In some traditions, people think, "Right, as long as I go to confession once a week, I can do what I like after that."

In other traditions, it's "Well, I'm baptised – I've said 'the sinner's prayer' – I'm good for all eternity."

In other traditions, it's "I've been to church this Sunday, worshipped Jesus, got some good lessons for life – I'm good to go.."

In other traditions, it's lighting the candles; or repeating the prayers; or eating the bread and the wine; or hearing a meaty sermon; or having a 4-hymn sandwich; or enjoying a concert-like atmosphere....

No church that I know of, is devoid of religious tradition, and every church has its own traditions... Anything that we do here, could become for you, empty religious tradition, if the love of God isn't in your heart... There is nothing wrong with

tradition, but if the tradition is what you depend on, then you've missed the point.

We are not saved, by religious tradition.... We are saved by the mercy of God, through faith in the Lord Jesus Christ.

The Pharisees believed, that through their tradition, they were holy, and right with God. They were wrong.

The Apostle Paul, understood this very well – he used to be a Pharisee. And when he wrote his letter to the church in Rome, he said this: ^{Romans 11:} **32** **For God has consigned all to disobedience, that he may have mercy on all.**

Isn't that wonderful? Everyone, has the opportunity to experience the mercy of God, because none of us are sinless. No-one can be holy, **without** experiencing the mercy of God. Paul also says: ^{Romans 3:22} **there is no distinction:** ²³ **for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,** ²⁴ **and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus,**

Isn't that wonderful??? Sin is the great leveller of humanity. All have sinned. No-one is righteous – not one... That is, until we are made righteous, through the forgiveness and mercy of God.

Do you understand this? Jesus said, : **'I desire mercy, not sacrifice.'** **For I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners."** We worship God here today, not because we came to Him as 'righteous', but because we came to Him as sinners – I came as a sinner. You came as a sinner – we can come no other way... And every Christian, is a recipient of God's mercy...

Isaac Newton wrote about this, when he penned his song, "Amazing grace, how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me."

Until you realise that you're wretched **without** Jesus, you're not in a fit state to come **to** Him. We come to Jesus, as wretched, pitiful, utterly sinful people, but we come to Him with a repentant heart. We need to see ourselves as we really are – sinners, in need of a saviour...

The story is told of a politician who, after receiving the proofs of a portrait, was very angry with the photographer. He stormed back to the photographer and said "This picture does not do me justice!"

The photographer replied, "Sir, with a face like yours, you don't need justice, you need mercy!"ⁱ

With a life like mine, I don't need justice – I need mercy. We all need mercy. Justice, is where we get what we deserve. Mercy is something we get when we don't deserve it...

And as we **receive** mercy, we must also **give** mercy.

And one of the ways we give mercy, is to share the message of the forgiveness of sins, with sinners. Jesus has the power to forgive sins.... He did not come to call the righteous, but sinners....

But, who do we mix with?... Consider your circle of friends.

Did you know that the best evangelists – the most effective evangelists, are often brand new Christians???? Do you know why that is? Well, here's 2 reasons: Firstly, the amazing mercy of God, is still fresh for them... – they've just experienced it, and they want others to experience it too.

But I think the second reason, is a very practical reason – they have friends who are not Christians. They have friends, who are desperate for God to intervene in their life, and lift them up, out of their current state of hopelessness...

They have good friends, like that, and God uses these brand new Christians, to introduce their friends to Jesus Christ. We can see it in Matthew. Jesus called Matthew to follow Him. And he did, and then the very next scene, we find Matthew inviting all his friends – all these sinners, to come and meet Jesus too.

There's a lesson here for us: If you're a new Christian, go hard, invite your friends to church. Invite your friends to bible study. Invite your friends to share a meal... If you put on a do, invite your Christian friends, and your non-Christian friends, together...

But there's also a very important lesson here, for those of us who **have** been Christians for a long time – it's a lesson for those of us who tend toward a monastic lifestyle – for those of us who, really rarely mix with sinners...

Mix.

Wondering who to have over for Sunday lunch? Try inviting someone who will be shocked that you even thought of them, and when they seem reluctant, insist that you'd really love them to come. Invite the town drunk; or the immoral neighbour; or the dishonest businessman; or the blaspheming workman....

Invite them to church. Invite them to lunch. Have them over to your place... Love them... And be quick to accept an invitation back to their place...

Today, you and I are Jesus' hands and feet. Yep, it might be uncomfortable... But because we've received mercy, we need to show mercy... Mix with "all types" – mix with sinners.

Mix with saints... Always shine the light of Christ, into whatever dark place you set foot...

Questions?

ⁱ www.holwick.com No.10431