



ELECT EXILES – 1 PETER BE HOLY

1 Peter 1:14-21

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¹⁴As obedient children, do not be conformed to the passions of your former ignorance, ¹⁵but as he who called you is holy, you also be holy in all your conduct, ¹⁶since it is written, "You shall be holy, for I am holy." ¹⁷And if you call on him as Father who judges impartially according to each one's deeds, conduct yourselves with fear throughout the time of your exile, ¹⁸knowing that you were ransomed from the futile ways inherited from your forefathers, not with perishable things such as silver or gold, ¹⁹but with the precious blood of Christ, like that of a lamb without blemish or spot. ²⁰He was foreknown before the foundation of the world but was made manifest in the last times for the sake of you ²¹who through him are believers in God, who raised him from the dead and gave him glory, so that your faith and hope are in God.

Introduction

One of the great things about 1 Peter is that we know exactly why it was written. For Peter tells us plainly at the end of the letter. Turn in your Bibles to 5:12. There we read:

By Silvanus, a faithful brother as I regard him, I have written briefly to you, exhorting and declaring that this is the true grace of God. Stand firm in it.

Peter has, then, two reasons for writing. First, to *declare* what is the true grace of God. And, second, to *exhort* his hearers to stand firm in that grace. Peter not only announces the true grace of God, he calls his hearers to live in light of it.

The opening verses of 1 Peter are devoted to the first task: to declaring the true grace of God. In fact, as we've seen in first twelve verses of 1 Peter, it's all been declaration—not exhortation. Everything in these opening verses is in the indicative, not the imperative. In other words, there is not a single command in these first twelve verses. Peter is simply laying out the facts of our new birth and ready salvation.

As we saw last week, however, Peter turns a corner in 1:13. Beginning with 1:13 Peter begins to exhort his hearers in different ways to stand firm in the true grace of God. There are actually four leading exhortations or commands in this next section of Scripture; four hooks, you might say, on which to hang everything else in this passage. The first, as we saw last week, is in v. 13, "hope fully," the second is in v. 15, "be holy," the third is in v. 22, "love one another earnestly," and the fourth is in 2:2, "long for the pure spiritual milk."

But what is so critical to see is that all of these commands are rooted in and flow from the reality of our new birth in Christ. In fact, notice how reference or allusion to the reality of the Christian's new birth flows through this passage. You can see this in the following verses:

- 'born again to a living hope' (1:3)
- 'as obedient children' (1:14)
- 'born again through the word of God' (1:23)
- 'like newborn infants' (2:1)
- mention of God as 'Father' (1:3; 1:17)

Friends, this is so important to see so that you understand that Christian living is rooted first of all in Christian identity—not the other way around. Our new birth is the source of our new life. We have been born again to a new way of life, yes; but that new way of life is rooted in the reality of being born again to a living hope. That's what this whole section of Scripture is designed to impress upon us. New birth leads to new ethics. Being born again leads to living differently. Your new identity as a child of God leads to new activity. Who you are in Christ shapes how you live in the world.

Now, I've taken time to underscore this point at the outset of today's sermon because of what today's passage challenges us with: the command to "be holy." You see, when we hear the word "holiness," much less the command to "be holy," we get a little nervous. We tend to instantly fall back on our own resources and our own sense of failure. It's got the same emotional impact as the command: "Pay your taxes." It evokes in most of us a sense of dread or fear, a sense of insecurity, a sense of insufficiency: "Have I set enough aside? Can I get them filed in time? Have I already missed the deadline?"

This is why it is so important to understand that your new life in Christ flows from your new identity in Christ. Brothers and sisters, hear me on this: if you have been born again, holy is what you *are*! If you have been born again, holiness is not your achievement, but God's. Holy is not a status you seek; holy is a reality you embrace. Holiness is not a moral standard you strive to pursue; holiness is the divine life of God's Holy Spirit expressing himself in and through you.

Holiness: A Definition

In the Bible, holiness is about being set apart. Something is holy if it is set apart from the world and set apart for God. But this being set apart is not something we do; it's something God does for us. Holiness is rooted in God's call on our life. God is the one who calls you to himself and thus he is the one who makes you holy. God the Father, God the Son, God the Holy Spirit—the three persons of the Godhead are the source of our holiness. They are the reason for our being set apart.

Peter has already explained this in the opening verses of his letter. In fact, in his opening address to those to whom he is writing, he underscores this very fact of their holiness—of their being set apart to God (1:2):

- They are elect according to the foreknowledge of God the Father: set apart from before the foundations of the world.
- They are sanctified by the Spirit: set apart by God's own holy Presence, his Spirit, who has taken up residence within them.

- And they are sprinkled with the blood of Jesus Christ: set apart by the Son as a result of being covered in his cleansing sacrifice.

Peter wants his readers to understand, then, that they are already holy, already set apart, already, in the most profound sense, separated from the world and consecrated to God because of what God, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, have already done.

So, too, I want you to understand that if you have been born again, holy is what you are. That is your identity as a Christian. More than that: this is the reality of who you are as a Christian: holy, set apart by God and for God. This is why the New Testament so often refers to believers as “saints,” or “holy ones.” That’s who we are. This is also why Peter can go on to say of all who trust in Christ with their lives that they are “a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a *holy* nation, a people for his own possession” (2:9).

Be Holy Versus Become Holy

But if holy is what we are, then what of the call to be holy? What does it mean, if it does not mean to seek to become holy or to move from being unholy to holy? The call to be holy in this passage, as well as throughout the whole Bible, is the call to *embrace* the reality of your holiness for all of life and *express* the reality of your holiness in all of life. That’s what it means to be holy: to embrace the reality of who you are in Christ for all of life, not just a part of your life; and to express the reality of who you are in Christ in all of life, not just in certain aspects of your life.¹

Let me illustrate how this works with a single passage of Scripture. The passage is found in the beginning of Ephesians 5, and there Paul is talking about the kind of behaviors that are out of step with being a Christian. But notice how he puts it:

But among you there must not be even a hint of sexual immorality, or of any kind of impurity, or of greed, *because these are improper for God’s holy people*. Nor should there be obscenity, foolish talk or coarse joking, which are out of place, but rather thanksgiving (vv. 3-4).

Notice carefully how Paul argues against certain worldly or unholy practices: not by saying that if you do these things you won’t be able to attain holiness; or if you practice them you will lose your holiness. Instead, his argument is that these practices are completely incongruous and out of sync with who you are as holy people. Sexual impropriety of any kind, greediness, dirty jokes—they not fitting to who you are as holy people.

The First Incentive for Holiness: The Character of God

Now, as we turn our attention to this passage in particular, what we see is that Peter here does not elaborate on what holiness is, nor does he explain how we are to be holy. Instead, his attention is focused on why we ought to be holy. Thus, what we have in vv. 14-21 are several powerful incentives to be holy.

¹ Cf. Michaels, *1 Peter*, p. 59: “Holiness is to characterize the day-by-day conduct of Christian believers always and everywhere.”

The first is this: *we are to be holy because God is holy*. Our character as God's children is to reflect God's character as our Father. As the old adage has it: like father, like son. This is how Peter presents the first incentive to holiness (vv. 14-16):

As obedient children, do not be conformed to the passions of your former ignorance, 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."

As creatures, we were designed to reflect our Creator. Yet as finite creatures there are of course so many ways in which we cannot reflect our infinite Creator. We cannot reflect his omniscience; we are finite in what we know and understand. We cannot reflect his omnipotence; we are weak and frail. We cannot reflect his being pure spirit; we are embodied beings. We cannot reflect his immutability; we change. We cannot reflect his eternality; we inhabit time. In none of these ways can we be like God.

But we can, friends, be like God in this most precious and important of ways: we can reflect the character of God. While we cannot reflect the nature of God—for God is God and we are not—we can reflect the character of God: in particular, his holiness, his moral excellencies, his moral beauty. This is precisely what we were created to do: Adam and Eve were created in perfect holiness, and thus designed to reflect the holiness of their Creator. This is also what the Bible calls us to, and what these verses call us to.

One of the fun things about having children is seeing how they reflect your DNA: the color of your eyes, the shape of your body, the tone of your skin, the curl in your hair. But may I say that one of the even greater joys of having children is seeing how they reflect your character, your commitments and values, your way of life. I've had a powerful reminder of this in adopting two children who not only don't share my DNA, but don't look anything like me. For starters, my two boys, Addis and Rager, they're black, and I'm white. But the deeply satisfying thing will be to watch how they nevertheless reflect their father's character and commitments, my way of life.

As God's adopted children, our lives are to reflect his in this same way. He who called us is holy. And we are called, as his obedient children, to be holy in all our conduct, in all of life. Like father, like son. This is Peter's first incentive to holiness.

The Second Incentive for Holiness: The Judgment of God

The second incentive for holiness is this: *we are to be holy because God our Father is also an impartial Judge*. This is Peter's point in verse 17:

And if you call on him as Father who judges impartially according to each one's deeds, conduct yourselves with fear throughout the time of your exile.

Now, muse with me for just a moment on the extraordinary juxtaposition of images in this verse—God the Father and God the Judge. One thinks of C. S. Lewis' comment that what people would really like is:

. . . not so much a Father in heaven as a grandfather in heaven—a senile benevolence who, as they say, 'liked to see young people enjoying themselves,' and

whose plan for the universe was simply that it might be truly said at the end of each day, 'a good time was had by all.'

As Lewis goes on to say,

Not many people would formulate a theology in precisely those terms: but a conception not very different lurks at the back of many minds. I do not claim to be an exception: I should very much like to live in a universe which was governed on such lines.²

And so too would many today, who revel in the reality of God's fatherly affection, yet do so one-sidedly and thus lose perspective on the fact that our Father is also our Judge. In fact, we are tempted to think that because God is our Father, he therefore no longer takes notice of our little acts of disobedience. We presume he's somehow loosened the standard of holiness and thus grades us on a curve.

We are often quite partial in the parenting of our own children. We tolerate behavior in our own kids that we would never begin to tolerate in someone else's kids. We hear a child talk back to her mother and it raises a response from us. Yet the same thing could happen just a minute or two later from our own child, and may well be overlooked.

Now, the temptation is to think that God the Father does the same thing with his children. It is very easy to assume that because we are God's children, he will overlook our disobedience. So we might look with disdain or moral indignation at the gossip we hear at the office or the covetousness we see in the neighbors across the street. But we all too easily overlook it in our selves or perhaps among our Christian friends.

Friends, God's response to your sin doesn't change when you become a Christian. He doesn't begin grading you on a different scale. He doesn't like pride before you're a Christian; and he doesn't like pride after you're a Christian. Nor will he judge you any differently because you are a Christian. God is your Father, yes; but God is also an impartial judge. He will judge you the same way he will judge everyone else: "according to each one's deeds."

We are, therefore, to conduct ourselves with *fear* throughout the time of our exile, in light of the coming judgment of God. But what does it mean to live in fear in this life? It means to fear anything that might cause you to fall under the impartial judgment of God.

- Fear covetousness: "For you may be sure of this, that everyone who . . . covetous . . . has no inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and God" (Eph. 5:5).
- Fear lust, "For it is better that you lose one of your members than that your whole body go into hell" (Matt. 5:30).
- Fear cowardice, "for the cowardly . . . their portion will be in the lake that burns with fire and sulfur, which is the second death" (Rev. 21:8).
- Fear every careless word that comes out of your mouth: "I tell you, on the day of judgment people will give an account for every careless word they speak" (Matt. 12:36).

² C. S. Lewis, *Problem of Pain*, p. 40.

Friends, there is to be fear in the Christians life. Fear anything that would lead you to turn away from the living God, for, as the writer to the Hebrews soberly reminds us, “It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God” (10:31).

We have, then, a second incentive to holiness in this passage. We are to be holy because the one whom we call upon as Father is also an impartial judge, who will render to each one according to his deeds.

The Third Incentive for Holiness: The Sacrifice of God

If the first incentive for holiness is the character of God, and the second is the judgment of God, then the third is this: the sacrifice of God. We find Peter describe this third incentive for holiness in the remaining verses, verses 18-21. And this is the point of what he says: *the sacrifice of God is designed to lead us to holiness.*

We are to live lives of holiness in the world because God has paid a massive price to redeem us from un-holiness. As verse 17 says, we are to conduct ourselves with fear in light of the final judgment, but we are to do so in a certain way. How? The next two verses explain:

. . . knowing that you were ransomed from the futile ways inherited from your forefathers, not with perishable things such as silver or gold, but with the precious blood of Christ, like that of a lamb without blemish or spot.

God has spared no expense to secure our holiness. Forget about silver and gold! God has given us his only Son, to assume human flesh, live a humble life, and die a humiliating death, shedding his blood for the sins of the whole world. He was a lamb without blemish or spot; he was a lamb led to the slaughter. And it is the lamb’s shed blood that is so unimaginably precious: precious to you, yes, but precious to God, as well. That’s how serious the Father is about our holiness.

Are you so serious about anything that you would be willing to give up your own son or daughter to see that it happens? What about that person in your life who has snubbed you or ignored you or treated you unfairly? If you knew that giving your own son or daughter over to death would radically and forever change that person’s life, would you do it?

But let me say that there is a way to misread the force of what Peter wants to say here. How should the knowledge of the costliness of Christ’s sacrifice motivate you to live a holy life? Not by guilt-tripping you into obedience. Peter’s point is not to say that God has done so much for you, now it’s time for you to do a little in return for God. God gave you his Son, now you give him your life.

Instead, the point is that God has gone to the greatest possible extent to demonstrate both his reliability and his power, and this in turn should forever secure our complete confidence in God the Father’s commitment to you. As he goes on to say (vv. 20-21):

He was foreknown before the foundation of the world but was made manifest in the last times for your sake, who through him are believers in God, who raised him from the dead and gave him glory, so that your faith and hope are in God.

This is the logic we see in Rom. 8:32, where Paul says: “He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things?” The result of God giving his Son and raising him from the dead should forever fix our faith and hope in him. He’s demonstrated his commitment—he gave his Son—and he’s demonstrated his ability to follow through—he raised him from the dead; so we can hope fully in him! And faith and hope is what drives holiness.

Conclusion

So, friends, holiness—that describes who you already are, if you are in Christ and set apart by God’s Holy Spirit. Being holy in all your conduct—this describes what God our Father calls all of his children to. Because of who we are as God’s children, because of who God is as our Father, and because of what has happened to us because of our being born again to a living hope. And embracing the reality of your holiness, and expressing it in all of life—this is the great privilege and opportunity of the Christian life.

But the call to be holy is of course not something we do in our own strength. No, we are to be holy, first, by means of the Holy Spirit. In fact, the call to be holy is really nothing other than a call to “live by the Spirit” (Gal. 5:16) or “walk by the Spirit” (Gal. 5:18). For the only holiness you and I will ever have is borrowed holiness, the holiness of God’s own Spirit animating our lives and working in us.

Second, we are to be holy through the convicting power of Holy Scripture. If you are to live a life of holiness, you must develop biblical convictions. If you are to not be conformed to the pattern of this world, you must be transformed by the renewing of your mind. But the only way to have your mind renewed is to know and indeed memorize God’s holy Word. The Word of God is the only thing that can bring both guidance in all the various situations of life, as well as conviction.

Finally, brothers and sisters, let us be reminder of the fact that holiness is where untold joy and deepest satisfaction is to be found. For, as the Apostle Paul reminds, “the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking but of righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit” (Rom. 14:17).