



A Holy People

November 1, 2009

BACKGROUND SCRIPTURE:

1 PETER 1

PRINTED TEXT:

1 PETER 1:13–25

Just as he who called you is holy, so be holy in all you do; for it is written: “Be holy, because I am holy.”

—1 Peter 1:15, 16

Opening Song

Apostles' Creed

I believe in God the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth, and in Jesus Christ, His only Son, our Lord who was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead and buried; the third day He arose from the dead, He ascended into heaven and sitteth on the right hand of God the Father Almighty; from thence He shall come to judge the quick and the dead. I believe in the Holy Spirit, the Church Universal, the communion of the saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting

Opening Prayer

1 PETER 1:13-25 (NIV)

1¹³Therefore, prepare your minds for action; be self-controlled; set your hope fully on the grace to be given you when Jesus Christ is revealed. ¹⁴As obedient children, do not conform to the evil desires you had when you lived in ignorance. ¹⁵But just as he who called you is holy, so be holy in all you do; ¹⁶for it is written: "Be holy, because I am holy." ¹⁷Since you call on a Father who judges each man's work impartially, live your lives as strangers here in reverent fear. ¹⁸For you know that it was not with perishable things such as silver or gold that you were redeemed from the empty way of life handed down to you from your forefathers, ¹⁹but with the precious blood of Christ, a lamb without blemish or defect. ²⁰He was chosen before the creation of the world, but was revealed in these last times for your sake. ²¹Through him you believe in God, who raised him from the dead and glorified him, and so your faith and hope are in God.

²²Now that you have purified yourselves by obeying the truth so that you have sincere love for your brothers, love one another deeply, from the heart. ²³For you have been born again, not of perishable seed, but of imperishable, through the living and enduring word of God. ²⁴For, "All men are like grass, and all their glory is like the flowers of the field; the grass withers and the flowers fall, ²⁵but the word of the Lord stands forever." And this is the word that was preached to you.

INTRODUCTION**A. THE AGE OF UNHOLINESS**

I recently attended a baseball game with my family. After being seated, I was bothered to hear a stream of expletives from the man behind me. This was joined by a woman's voice, equally foul. Then I was truly surprised to hear a third voice, a young child who was also a potty mouth. I quickly realized that this was a family talking in their normal conversation patterns without concern for being in public. Words that are offensive or irreverent to many people were commonplace for them.

I am not without failings in this area, but I do guard my speech and strive for conversation that is pleasing to God. In other words, although my efforts may fall short, I seek to be holy in what comes from my mouth.

We seem to be living in an age of unholiness. It is a time of moral chaos and uncertainty. Many today believe that the most important value in life is personal freedom and independence. Anyone who would impose standards or rules is intolerant. Ironically, such intolerance is not to be tolerated. Yet holiness is expected of the people of God.

The biblical understanding of holiness has two important aspects. First, holiness implies a separation, a consecration. That which is holy is set apart. It is neither worldly nor commonplace (see Leviticus 10:10; 20:26; Ezekiel 22:26; 42:20; 44:23; compare Hebrews 7:26). Second, that which is holy is morally pure. It is clean and untainted by sin (see Philippians 2:15). These dual aspects are illustrated in Psalm 24:3, 4. There the one who wants to ascend the holy hill of the Lord (separation from the world) must have clean hands (moral purity).

Holiness, then, is somewhat measurable because it involves standards and invites comparisons. All standards and comparisons for holiness come back to God, for he alone is absolutely holy (1 Samuel 2:2). We must depend on the power of God to achieve holiness. We are made holy (sanctified) through the cleansing power of the Holy Spirit (see 2 Thessalonians 2:13). This is our imperative for abstaining from sin at every opportunity (1 Thessalonians 4:3). So, yes, we live in an age of growing, strident, and public unholiness. But we are still called to be holy in word and deed.

B. LESSON BACKGROUND

Many Christians today consider Paul to be the greatest of the apostles because he wrote so much of the New Testament. But many in the first century probably considered Peter to be the greatest apostle. After all, he had been an eyewitness to the momentous events of Jesus' ministry. Peter also emerged as the leader of the Jerusalem church after Jesus' ascension.

Peter's prominence in the early church may be seen in Acts 12. Here King Herod Agrippa I discovered that the execution of a church leader increased his popularity among the nonbelieving Jews. His first victim was James, the brother of John. This choice seems to have been made arbitrarily and is not explained. When Herod realized its effect, however, he sought to take the life of the biggest fish in the Christian pond: Peter. At the time he was both the public face of the church and its primary leader. To lose him would have been a crippling blow; Acts 12 tells the story of Peter's miraculous deliverance.

Although not documented in the New Testament, reliable tradition has Peter traveling extensively outside of Palestine (compare 1 Corinthians 9:5). Strong tradition claims that Peter ended up in Rome sometime during the AD 60s. There he met his death under the persecutions of Emperor Nero, about AD 67 or 68. One often-repeated tradition says that Peter was crucified

upside down at his own request, claiming that he was not worthy to receive death in the same manner as Jesus (see John 21:18, 19 for a reference to Peter's death).

While in Rome, Peter wrote two short letters that have been preserved in the New Testament. At least the first one was written with the help of Silas (1 Peter 5:12). This letter mentions being in "Babylon" (5:13), a code term for the city of Rome. The Jews referred to Rome as Babylon because it was the oppressor of their nation.

Peter's first letter is addressed to people in "Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia and Bithynia" (1 Peter 1:1). These were Roman provinces located in modern Turkey and may have been visited by Peter during his travels. Peter knew that the recipients of this letter were confronted with persecution (see 1 Peter 3:13–15). Thus he gave them instructions that called them to live holy lives even when faced with this threat. This theme—holiness in spite of persecution—makes 1 Peter a timeless resource for the church. Every generation of believers encounters persecution.

I. MOTIVATION FOR HOLINESS (1 PETER 1:13–16)

A. SOBER ANTICIPATION (V. 13)

13. Therefore, prepare your minds for action; be self-controlled; set your hope fully on the grace to be given you when Jesus Christ is revealed.

To *prepare your minds for action* is akin to our expressions "roll up your sleeves" or "put on your work gloves." Peter is advising the readers to prepare mentally for the ordeal ahead (compare Luke 12:35).

This is reinforced by several other expressions. By instructing them to *be self-controlled*, Peter is asking the readers to get serious, because what lies ahead will not be fun. He also gives them a focus point: they are to think about the time *when Jesus Christ is revealed*. This is a reference to the *grace* we gain when we remember that Christ has not abandoned his people. He has promised to return and take his faithful ones home to be with him forever (1 Thessalonians 4:17).

B. WISE OBEDIENCE (V. 14)

14. As obedient children, do not conform to the evil desires you had when you lived in ignorance.

Christian parents are faced with the challenge of raising their children to live holy, godly lives. What motivation to this

end can those parents give the children that will last a lifetime?

Peter faces this same issue when writing to his *children* in the faith. For Peter, the preparation for persecution is more than mental toughness. It should manifest itself in the *obedient* lifestyle activities of the believer. Will we strive to be obedient in the matters of godly behavior? Will the general passions of our flesh be the controlling factor? For Peter, such fleshly *desires* are self-destructive (1 Peter 2:11; compare Romans 12:2; Ephesians 2:3; 4:17, 18). We should no longer yield to them after escaping the *ignorance* of unbelief.

C. DIVINE IMITATION (VV. 15, 16)

15, 16. But just as he who called you is holy, so be holy in all you do; for it is written: "Be holy, because I am holy."

Peter quotes Leviticus 19:2. The history of the church records many examples of men and women who have sought to *be holy*. The church today offers many examples also of those who struggle mightily to expunge sin and live holy lives. Yet every one of these wonderful people has failed at some level. No human being (other than Jesus when he was in the flesh) can be seen as an absolute, perfect example of holiness.

We should not conclude that we cannot be part of the people of God unless our lives are

sterling examples of holiness. Holiness is not an exclusionary tactic by God; it is an inclusionary one. By yielding our lives to him and obediently serving him, he invites us to participate in his holiness.

The church is holy because God is holy and he has consecrated it. It is not made up of people who have achieved personal perfection, but of sinners who have been sanctified by God's grace. This marvelous gift serves as a powerful motivation for us to work hard at the elimination of sinful, unholy behavior. While God's gracious sanctification of the believer is a free gift, personal holiness comes from radical self-sacrifice and discipline.

II. COST OF HOLINESS (1 PETER 1:17–21)

A. REVERENT LIVING (V. 17)

17. *Since you call on a Father who judges each man's work impartially, live your lives as strangers here in reverent fear.*

Acts 10:34, offering a statement made by Peter many years earlier, also affirms that "God does not show favoritism." This means that social status, race, gender, or other human standards have no role in personal holiness. Being rich does not help one be holy, for holiness cannot be purchased. Likewise, being poor is of no advantage in the pursuit of holiness, for lack of material goods does not equal sanctification. We are to live *in reverent fear*, in trembling respect of God's standards and expectations.

B. PRECIOUS REDEMPTION (VV. 18–20)

18–20. *For you know that it was not with perishable things such as silver or gold that you were redeemed from the empty way of life handed down to you from your forefathers,*

This verse touches on the familiar biblical theme of redemption, but with a different twist. Peter reminds us that there is more to Christian redemption than a rescue from the death penalty of sin. We are also redeemed from the *empty way of life* of tradition.

Peter implies that many people assume that money is the answer to life's challenges. A common perception is that *silver* and *gold* can buy happiness and provide escape from life's difficulties. Under this line of reasoning, wealth is an end unto itself.

The Christian perspective will not allow for this, however. Wealth can make us believe the lie of independence, which is that we don't need God or his holiness (see last week's lesson). Money is not evil, but it cannot save us.

19... *but with the precious blood of Christ, a lamb without blemish or defect.*

When we adopt an eternal perspective, we realize that true redemption is possible only through the atoning sacrifice of Jesus on the cross. At this point Peter invokes the image of the Passover *lamb* to describe Jesus (see 1 Corinthians 5:7). We are reminded of the great cost of this sacrifice for God. Jesus, his Son, was his perfect lamb; as such, he served as the necessary sacrifice to take away the world's sin (John 1:29).

20. *He was chosen before the creation of the world, but was revealed in these last times for your sake.*

God's holy plan for our salvation is not an afterthought or improvised plan. It has been ordained *before the creation of the world*. God's love for us is so deep that he planned for human redemption even before anyone had sinned. This is one of those places where we must scratch our heads a little and admit that we don't fully comprehend. We simply rejoice that God's love has been *revealed* to us through the saving acts of Jesus Christ.

C. FAITHFUL HOPE (V. 21)

21. *Through him you believe in God, who raised him from the dead and glorified him, and so your faith and hope are in God.*

Peter's eternal perspective allows him to see the ultimate goal of God's plan. The sacrificial death of Jesus was followed by his resurrection and exaltation in Heaven.

The focus of our *faith* is not just a bloodstained cross or an empty tomb. It is also the mighty God of the universe, who reigns from Heaven with Jesus at his right hand.

From this perspective, the need for holiness becomes clear. We place our faith in God, and all of our hopes rest in him. How, then, can we maintain this relationship if we allow unholiness to win the day in our lifestyles? We become like Isaiah, who cried “Woe to me!” when he experienced God’s holiness (Isaiah 6:5). Our own experience of God’s absolute purity is a powerful motivation for us to forsake our futile, sinful ways and be like him.

III. APPLICATION OF HOLINESS (1 PETER 1:22–25)

A. AS LOVE (v. 22)

22. Now that you have purified yourselves by obeying the truth so that you have sincere love for your brothers, love one another deeply, from the heart.

Peter seems to be a bottom-line guy. Talk is good, but action is better. Therefore, he follows up his doctrinal discussion of holiness with some practical advice for our quest of personal holiness.

Peter’s action plan is surprisingly simple: show holiness by loving others. He says we must love *deeply*, meaning it must become a passion. It must be *sincere*, for there is no hypocrisy in true holiness. It must come *from the heart*, for lip-service holiness is worthless.

Peter’s picture of a person pursuing holiness is neither that of the austere, unsmiling killjoy nor the disconnected, head-in-the-clouds mystic. We offer our obedience with a view to holiness when we are warm, generous, and forgiving to our Christian brothers and sisters (compare John 13:34; Romans 12:10).

B. AS REBIRTH (vv. 23–25)

23–25. For you have been born again, not of perishable seed, but of imperishable, through the living and enduring word of God.

When we commit to the pursuit of holiness, we adopt a new perspective, a new set of priorities. Our focus has shifted away from ourselves and toward God and his people. Our desire is to serve him, not ourselves. We “put on the new self,” the person like God in “true righteousness and holiness” (Ephesians 4:24).

We do not instinctively know how to do this, however. This is why Peter ends this section by reminding his readers of a key factor in maintaining holiness: the *word of God*. Scripture guides God’s people in the ways of righteousness. It has done so for thousands of years. It is *imperishable* and eternal. It will never fail us.

24, 25. For,

“All men are like grass,

and all their glory is like the flowers of the field;

the grass withers and the flowers fall,

but the word of the Lord stands forever.”

And this is the word that was preached to you.

Peter reinforces the abiding value of the Word of God by quoting Isaiah 40:6–8. Scripture is contrasted with the annual cycle of *grass* and *flowers*. These things grow for a time and then die (compare James 1:10, 11). Such a fleeting life is like the *glory* of man, for the famous of today are the forgotten of tomorrow.

The enduring nature of *the word of the Lord* stands in stark contrast with *all men*. The central aspect of Scripture for Christians is the good news about Jesus Christ. He is “the Holy One of God” (John 6:69) who atoned for our sins. He offers the cleansing power of the Holy Spirit to all who believe in him.

CONCLUSION

Christians are bound to God and to each other by the new covenant provided by the atoning blood of Christ. The first-century church was faced with the challenge of living out this covenant in the midst of hostile surroundings. This situation was well understood by Simon Peter, that great apostle of the first century, for he had experienced it firsthand. This final unit of the quarter focuses on various aspects of the church as the covenant community of God. This week's lesson begins the series by examining the issue of holiness within the covenant community as it struggled to live faithfully according to the call of Jesus.

Some Christians are perplexed when it comes to personal holiness. Whose responsibility is it? If it is strictly our job, we are inadequate and doomed to failure before we begin. If it is God's work, then why should we be concerned about it? Shouldn't we just get out of the way and let God do it? This way of thinking misses the true basis for Christian holiness. We do not seek holiness as a way of earning God's favor. To the contrary, we have the possibility of holiness because God has been gracious to us.

We don't work to eliminate sin so that we can get merit points in God's ledger. Through the work of Christ we already are in God's ledger, the Book of Life (Revelation 20:12, 15; 21:27). He helps us be pure and holy. He does so (and wants to do so) because the unholy elements of life are the things that destroy us.

Holiness, then, is not to be a duty, but a joy. We rejoice in the holy name of the Lord (see Psalm 105:3). The "prospect of the righteous is joy" (Proverbs 10:28), the great hope of being at peace with our Creator and content to serve him.

So how does one "be holy"? It does not happen by receding into a life of passivity. It happens, rather, by pursuing righteousness with all the strength Jesus gives us to do so.

IGNORANCE

The English poet Thomas Gray observed in 1742, "Where ignorance is bliss, 'tis folly to be wise." We may reasonably wonder what happens when ignorance is not bliss!

When I was a young boy, I read a lot of Superman and Batman comic books. Flying did not seem to be that difficult, particularly if a person had a large cape such as these two comic book figures wore. I had also seen pictures of parachutists, and I figured that if the principle worked for them, it should work for me. So one day I took a blanket off my bed, climbed up about 15 feet in an oak tree in our backyard, and prepared to descend gently with my homemade parachute.

I jumped—and hit the ground very hard. The blanket-parachute did not slow me down at all. Fortunately, I didn't break any bones, but the episode did shatter my faith in my parachutist abilities. There were a few laws of physics of which I was ignorant, and it wasn't bliss.

This principle applies in other situations. People who drive at high rates of speed are often ignorant of the risks. Eating unwashed vegetables in a foreign country often produces something far less than bliss. That's why Peter counsels against living according to the standards of our former days of ignorance. Instead, we are to live in obedience to spiritual principles.

CORRUPTIBLE SEED

Genetic engineering, sometimes called biotechnology, is big business these days. Essentially, it means modifying the genetic material from a certain form of life (either animal or vegetable) to produce a different end result—hopefully, a better end result.

Those in favor of the procedure claim it can mean vast improvement in our quality of life. This can apply to improved vegetables, improved meat products from engineered animals, even superior medicines. The claim is that genetically engineered food can yield larger harvests and improved nutrition. It is now estimated that 60 percent of all food in America contains genetically altered material.

Opponents of genetic engineering contend that no one knows what the ultimate results are with these changed organisms. Some experiments have already failed because the mutations did not have long-term viability. Engineered petunias lost fertility and experienced altered leaf and root structures. Engineered salmon grew too fast and turned green. There is also concern about whether these new products will cross-fertilize with the native species and upset the balance of major ecosystems.

It is interesting to observe that Peter states that when we are born again, we are born of incorruptible seed. Corruptible seed may be liable to various scientific experiments aimed at improvement, but our spiritual DNA is not subject to scientific tampering! God guarantees it.

LET'S TALK IT OVER

- 1. In what ways can you “roll up your sleeves” for the kingdom of God?**

- 2. In what specific areas do you need to make holiness a higher priority? What hindrances will you overcome to do this?**

- 3. How is faith and hope in God revealed in the lives of Christians in general and in your life in particular?**

- 4. What does unfeigned or sincere love look like?**

- 5. How do you demonstrate confidence in the Word of the Lord?**

LET'S TALK IT OVER

1. In what ways can you “roll up your sleeves” for the kingdom of God?

The challenge Peter gives in this verse is to use your mind for God, although we normally use the expression “roll up your sleeves” in connection with action in physical labor. But the way we prepare our minds will determine how we act. God gave His people brains to be used for Him. This means that Christians must take time to study Scripture. That involves more than sitting through sermons and Sunday school classes week after week.

Each Christian must be as eager as the Bereans in Acts 17:11. To the study of Scripture should be added the study of the culture in which we live. That will help us be aware of the issues being faced so we can redirect a misguided culture.

2. In what specific areas do you need to make holiness a higher priority? What hindrances will you overcome to do this?

Certainly we should strive for holiness in all areas. But people have different battles. For some, the battle is with sexual sins. Others fail to practice holiness in regard to the use of money. Still others struggle with sins of the tongue (profanity, gossip, etc.). One Christian can drive past a bar and never have any temptation, while another person struggles in this same setting.

We can be hindered in our battles for holiness when we put ourselves into positions where the temptation is right before us. Thus the major part of the battle can be won by avoiding such contexts to begin with. Counselors call this “modifying our environment.”

3. How is faith and hope in God revealed in the lives of Christians in general and in your life in particular?

Christians are called on to be light in a world of darkness (Matthew 5:14). That means that those who have faith in God act and react differently from those who do not have this hope. Peter emphasizes that this fact is seen in the holy lives of Christians. The “set apart” life is evident when God is trusted in all areas. The unbelieving, secular world trusts the use of force, the use of the ballot box, and the use of media to bring about change. Christians may engage culture by participating in these areas as the Bible allows, but our trust is always and ultimately in God.

Christians trust God and confess that Jesus is Lord even when (or especially when) things are going wrong. One’s faith in God is seen in what he or she talks about as well. Those things most important to us are the things we are most willing to share with others. Faith in God leads Christians to get involved in the task of evangelism. Christians who hope in Christ serve as positive role models in a fallen world.

4. What does unfeigned or sincere love look like?

The command to love fills the teaching of Scripture. Jesus says that to love is to fulfill the law. To define that love is a good start, but true love is evident in action.

Some followers of Christ try different ways to circumvent the need to love. For example, some state that they will love someone but do not believe they have to like the person. But verbal games may be just another way to disobey God if we’re not careful. Sincere love does not seek to get by with doing the least, but instead does the best for another. Sincere love requires time and effort. Love is seen when we do not look to our own interests only, but also to the interests of others (Philippians 2:4).

5. How do you demonstrate confidence in the Word of the Lord?

Sadly, the Word of the Lord often is more revered than read. For instance, a Gallup poll notes that American readership of the Bible declined from 73 percent in the 1980s to 59 percent in the year 2000; further, the same poll notes that the number of Americans who read the Bible at least

once a week declined from 40 percent to 37 percent over the course of the 1990s (www.gallup.com). But that trend seems to be reversing. The Barna Group (www.barna.org) reports that weekly Bible reading increased from 37 percent in 2001 to 47 percent in 2006.

PRAYER

Great God in Heaven, holy, holy, holy is your name. Guide us, we pray, in your ways of purity and righteousness. May we use your holiness as our goal. Remind us that we shall one day be in your holy presence forever. We pray this in the name of your Son, your holy one. Amen.