

Called to a Holy Life

What comes into your mind when you hear the word “holiness”? Are your first thoughts warm and comforting, or a bit dark and frightening? Do you feel drawn in, or kept out? Do you think of the grace we have been talking about over the past few sermons, or of the law that spelled failure to so many who tried to keep it?

And as we think about those questions, we need to look at some related ones, like, “Is God of two minds about us, full of forgiveness and yet continuing to make impossible demands on us? Is He both full of compassion and ready to judge us on the basis of every imperfection we have?” We have those impressions and we raise those questions because the text of Scripture presents both sides of this coin. It asks us to receive the abundance of grace that is freely offered and it asks us to change and live holy lives, to live as imitators of Him in the kinds of decisions we make.

We’ve looked at the grace side and now we need to spend a bit of time looking at the holiness side, and we’ll start today with Peter’s first letter, the first chapter, and, again, to help shape the context, let’s start reading early, v. 7, right after Peter has said that they may have to endure the grief of facing all kinds of trials in the short term:

These have come so that your faith -- of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire -- may be proved genuine and may result in praise, glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed. Though you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in Him and are filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy, for you are receiving the goal of your faith, the salvation of your souls.

Concerning this salvation, the prophets, who spoke of the grace that was to come to you, searched intently and with the greatest care, trying to find out the time and circumstances to which the Spirit of Christ in them was pointing when He predicted the sufferings of Christ and the glories that would follow. It was revealed to them that they were not serving themselves, but you, when they spoke of the things that have now been told you by those who have preached the gospel to you by the Holy Spirit sent from heaven. Even angels long to look into these things.

This is the backdrop to our passage and it tells us that some of the hard things happen in life so that the truly valuable things will remain strong. If faith is not tested, you can’t know whether or not it’s still healthy. If it is tested, and we pass the test, our confidence grows. Even if we fail one test, that failure can help us to see what we need to do to get back on the right track and we can be restored to the life of faith. In either case, we see that our faith is genuine because we love the Lord, we trust Him for what He has done for us on the cross, and we believe that He is saving us from the power of evil and death.

Then Peter goes on to say that the prophets of old tried to know when the Messiah would come, when His suffering would be accomplished and that they understood what would happen as a result. They were given a glimpse of the good news, the gospel, and they knew it would be coming to generations far after their own. These

prophets were fascinated by what the Spirit of Christ in them was revealing, hundreds of years before it would take place. Even angels find this great mystery fascinating and want to be able to look into it, to search the depths of the grace and wisdom of God.

The key word for the first paragraph is “faith” and for the second paragraph is “salvation”. Having faith in Christ, believing what He tells us about our need for salvation and about His provision on the cross, opens the door for us to enter in to His promises, to receive His gift.

Now let’s move on to verses 13 and following:

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

You and I have been called to live a holy life. We have been called to live in a way that both reflects the holiness of God and which brings Him honour and praise. Now let’s look deeper into this paragraph in order to gain understanding into how we can do this.

First let’s look at what we were before we came to faith in Christ. There is one word which is used to describe our state before we came to faith and that word is “ignorance”. We didn’t know what we didn’t know. We had no idea that we were living under a cloud of misconception and that the hope that the world offered us was empty, futile. We thought we knew a few things. We thought that we were in control, that we knew where we were going and that we had within ourselves the power to get there. We didn’t actually know a whole lot about Jesus, the man people swear by, yet who they think is irrelevant to their daily lives. This text makes clear that the result of living in that degree of ignorance is that we were conformed to the values of this world, that we obeyed our own evil desires which we had no power to resist because we had shut the source of spiritual power out of our lives. We didn’t know anything about the Holy Spirit and we hadn’t opened ourselves to His presence and to His guidance. “When you lived in ignorance, you conformed to the evil desires you had. Now, as obedient children, do not conform to the evil desires you had when you lived in ignorance.” Ignorance is not a good thing and it is no excuse for living in sin and selfishness.

But if ignorance is destructive, there are some things mentioned in this passage which are instructive, and which can help us to live this holy life we are called to.

1. “As obedient children” We have a new identity when we come to faith in Christ and that is that we are daughters and sons of the living God. When we live in a family, there are things that we do which are appropriate and helpful and there are possibilities of things we can do which are destructive and painful for the people

around us. I doubt if many of us were raised in a cave by chimpanzees or wolves, so we probably know something about family dynamics. We know that if dad is drinking away the family income, or if he is abusive and cruel, there are effects on every other member of the family, whether they are a victim or an enabler. Each person has to adapt to the reality of dad's sin and very often those adaptations are done in unhealthy, destructive ways. Or if mom feels very insecure in who she is and is always looking to the children to boost her self-esteem, those same children will feel a weight of unhealthy expectations and will either do all they can to make mom feel okay or they'll check out of the loop and let her suffer the consequences. Family dynamics are always complex and involve people adapting to the behaviours of others.

When you come into the family of God, you adapt to the Father, His purposes and His way of being. You come in to the family as "obedient children" who love the Father and who therefore will both try to please Him and will become imitators of His way of doing things. You will be strongly influenced by the reality that He loves you and has chosen you to be His child. You will be strongly influenced by the way He deals with your failures, the strengthening power of His grace and the compassionate ministry of the Holy Spirit within you. You will be strongly influenced by God's character of holiness and integrity.

You will quickly recognize that things you used to do because everyone else was doing them now seem unappealing. Where you once felt anticipation or attraction, you now feel a measure of sadness that you were once in this scene, that you once participated in things that make God's heart sad. All of this comes from the fact that you are now part of a new family, the family of faith, the family that draws its life from the joy of Jesus and from the embrace of your heavenly Father. Your identity has changed, dramatically, and with that change comes a new circle of influences, beginning with the Father and including the whole family of God. Not every relationship within that family is always helpful or healthy, but you find yourself being influenced by people who love you unconditionally, who help you when you need a hand, who pray with you and for you, who share their struggles with you and ask you to hold them accountable. You grow as a person because you belong to God's family. Someone rubs you the wrong way and you learn to deal with it in love and forgiveness. So, to make this long story really short, this new identity produces a new lifestyle, a new attitude and a new concern for others that goes way beyond what you knew before.

2. The paragraph begins with these words: "Therefore, prepare your minds for action." What does the "therefore" refer back to? The longing of the prophets and even of angels to see into the mystery of Christ's sufferings that were made the way for our salvation. This is the mystery and the glory of the ages, that God came down and took on Himself the just penalty for our rebellion against His rule. This is the pivotal point in human history, the salvation of our souls, the hope of the ages and so Peter says that we should prepare our minds for action. What does that phrase say to you? To me it says that the battleground is in the mind. We're not being asked to prepare our

bodies for physical warfare or to prepare our homes and churches for an onslaught of the weapons of human armies. We are being told to prepare our minds for action, to be thinking in a way that is appropriate considering this new revelation, the resurrection of Jesus Christ, the offer of forgiveness for sin and new life with Him.

And the rest of verse 13 builds on that; “be self-controlled; set your hope fully on the grace to be given when Jesus Christ is revealed.” What better way to be disciplined in our thinking than to be self-controlled, not simply giving in to the passions of the moment, not letting anger control our relationships, for example, or pride control our speech, or fear of what people might think of us control what we say about our faith in Jesus. Being self-controlled means being guided by our thoughtful, reflective selves rather than the strong emotion we may feel in unusual circumstances.

And then he says, “set your hope fully on the grace to be given when Jesus Christ is revealed.” Again, this is the kind of self-disciplined, self-controlled response to life that comes out of our faith, it comes out of what we believe to be true. We understand the promises that are made to us in Scripture, understand that there is a grace we receive now and a greater grace to come later and we set our hope on what we believe, on the grace that is yet to be given to those who trust in Jesus.

To summarize this verse 13, then, it says that because of how important the message of faith is, that prophets studied it intently and angels longed to know its mystery, even if just to honour them for their faith, take it seriously. Prepare your minds for action by being self-controlled, thoughtful, not just reacting to things, but trying to see them through the eyes of faith, setting your hope fully on the grace to be given you when Jesus Christ is revealed. That word “fully” deserves our attention, too, because it tells us to be “all in”, fully committed, not hedging our bets or keeping all our options open, but on board with Jesus.

So, to review, verse 14 refers to our new family connection, one which gives us a new identity as ‘obedient children’, and verse 13 tells us to build on the history of expectation that is seen in the prophets and respond by being thoughtful, self-controlled and fully confident of the hope that Jesus gives us. Those are positive, life-giving preparations for the instruction that follows.

3. “Don’t conform to the evil desires you had when you lived in ignorance. 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.” What does “holy” mean? Its basic meaning is “set apart”, “devoted” or “consecrated”. There have been other meanings attached to the word over the centuries, but the biblical sense is the simple one, something is holy which has been set apart for God’s purposes. In the Old Testament it might have been the holy place in the temple which was dedicated space for offering sacrifices to God. It might have been a person whose life was so powerfully used by God that he or she was seen as quite distinct from the ordinary; someone like Elijah or Moses might be called a holy man. When you look at their lives you see people who have been called out of ordinary lives and have been set apart or consecrated for God’s use. Well, that’s

exactly what this verse in 1 Peter is describing.

The “evil desires” that he refers to are not the kind of things which make you stand apart from the world. They are the actions that the world condones, that people who resent God’s laws are all too happy to participate in. You can do those kinds of things and feel like you fit right in, that you belong in full measure, to this world and the values of this world. The person who is ignorant of what God values and what He commands is not likely to stand against these desires, but the person who knows who she is, who has heard and responded to the call of Jesus to come out from the world and to follow Him -- will reject evil desires. Instead, she will pursue holiness, because God is holy.

We saw when we looked at family how the members of a family influence one another, particularly the parents have an influence on their children. In this verse, the dynamic is different. The focus here is on God as a being who is “set apart”, who is somewhat like us because we are made in His image, but who is unlike us in that He is commanding, He has authority and power beyond what we can aspire to, He is righteous in His dealings with the human race and is the only one able to bring justice to the earth. That’s the sense I get as I read this verse. The focus here is not so much on what we pick up by being a part of the family, but on who we become in obedience to His command to “Be holy, because I am holy.”

Can we do that just by wanting to? Not likely, but we can choose to make that our life’s direction. We can choose to honour God with our lives, to pursue His Kingdom values and priorities, or we can choose to dishonour Him by pursuing the values and priorities of this world system. Again, we’re not talking about perfection here, but about direction. Not perfection, direction. Where is your life headed? Are you finding yourself desiring God’s will to be done on earth as it is in heaven as much or more than you are desiring your will to be done in earth as it is in your own head? Do you find yourself wanting to know God in greater depth, to understand the Bible with wise insight, to have your life reveal His character? Then don’t let yourself get discouraged or side-tracked from those goals. Don’t give up because it seems so impossible, but, knowing that you’re loved, knowing that grace comes from the Father and encourages every effort you make, be at peace and be blessed and keep pursuing. Think of the things you learned from your parents when you were little, things like how to walk, how to talk, what was okay and what wasn’t okay, and how they, hopefully, taught in love.

Then think about how God teaches you what’s okay and what’s not okay, how patient He is, how gracious He is when you fall flat on your face, and just position yourself as a learner, as someone who wants to grow, to overcome the challenges you face and to move ahead into the future He has promised.

Here’s the summary for this lesson:

The challenge to holiness is one that takes place in the mind. And today we’ve looked at some key things that can help us pursue God’s will for us.

1. Recognize who you are, that once you say, "I believe" and "I trust", you become a child of God, a child who is both being influenced by your relationship with your Father in heaven and by all your brothers and sisters within God's big family.
2. Then, knowing who you are, exercise whatever degree of self-control you can. Be thoughtful about the decisions you make and, as part of that thoughtfulness, imagine the likely consequences of one course of action or the other. Choose with your hope fully set on the grace that will be given when Jesus Christ is revealed to the whole world.
3. Don't be conformed to old habit patterns from your past, from a time when you didn't know God and hadn't yet experienced His love for you. Press on to the standards of the new life that Jesus brings, the life of giving, serving, blessing and being blessed, of bringing hope to those who have lost hope and goodness to those who have tasted too much of evil. Be holy, be different, be set apart in service to your King and your Saviour.