

The Pursuit of Holiness

1 Peter 1:15-16

“Fix your eyes on Jesus.” That’s what you read in Hebrews 12. “Let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which so easily ensnares us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking unto Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith.”

It is a race, this thing we call the Christian life. A marathon. Or, maybe to use the image of today, it is the Indianapolis 500, the greatest of all auto racing, which starts in about a half hour. Five hundred miles is a long way to race, a lot of laps around the track. So if you are driving, fix your eyes on the checkered flag. If you are running on a track, fix your eyes on the finish line. As Christian, fix your eyes on Jesus, because he is both the author and the perfecter of your faith.

There is the promise of the gospel in that, isn’t there? The hope of the gospel.

Phil.1:6 “He who has begun a good work in you will complete it until the day of Jesus Christ.”

God will finish his work in you! That’s the promise. That’s the gospel. God saved us, “not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to His mercy.” God did it. So fix your eyes upon Jesus.

But then, we read in Hebrews 12 an exhortation. It is the declaration of a duty, a responsibility. You might even call it a warning.

Heb. 12:14 “Pursue peace with all people, and holiness, without which no one will see the Lord:15 looking carefully lest anyone fall short of the grace of God.”

So we must pursue holiness. And actually, without it, without holiness, you will not be able to see the Lord. So, no holiness, no heaven. But holiness is not a declaration, it is not an instantaneous work of God. It is something we are called to pursue. And that’s where have come this morning.

In our study of 1 Peter, we spent the first 7 weeks with an extended exposition of the promise of the gospel. The subject was your salvation, “ready to be revealed in the last time,” according to verse 5. It is an eternal inheritance reserved in heaven for you who have been born again. Then last week we shifted focus, to the applications of that salvation in your daily lives.

v.13-14

This morning, we come to the greatest of those applications, the greatest imperative of them all. The greatest declaration of the will of God for your life as a Christian. Remember, it is not an imperative or commandment that defines how you can be saved, but rather it is the application of your salvation to your life. Thus we read,

v.15-16

Maybe, however, you feel that is impossible. You and I have a problem, don’t we? I am not holy, not like God is holy. And neither are you. Maybe you feel a sense of exasperation to what seems like an impossible duty and obligation. Maybe you more likely identify with the Apostle Paul when he says,

Rom. 7:15 “For what I am doing, I do not understand. For what I will to do, that I do not practice; but what I hate, that I do... 18 For I know that in me (that is, in my flesh) nothing good dwells; for to will is present with me, but how to perform what is good I do not find. 19 For the good that I will to do, I do not do; but the evil I will not to do, that I practice.”

So what do we do with this exhortation of Peter? First, So let me emphasize and affirm that one purpose for this call to holiness is to drive you to Christ. One purpose is for this exhortation of the law to be a schoolmaster, to lead you to Christ, teaching you that you are entirely and completely dependent upon him for everything. Including most of all your standing before God. And for your deliverance from the dominion of sin, which is the very contradiction of holiness. Without Christ, you are hopeless and helpless when called to holiness.

Yet there is another purpose for this call to holiness. The first purpose is to drive you to Christ, and the second purpose is to drive you to holiness! In other words, the purpose for the exhortation of the law is to be a means of grace to stimulate you to obedience. Not in the sense of legalistic self-righteousness, but in the context of sanctification. The purpose for Peter exhorting his readers to be holy is to motivate them unto holiness, to stir them up in the pursuit of holiness. And I have that purpose this morning. People of God, this is what the Lord says to you this morning, “Be holy in all your conduct.” Be holy in all your behavior.

I realize that holiness will always be incomplete and imperfect throughout this life. There is always more room to grow and increase. The word for holiness is the same word sometimes translation sanctification, which is, by definition, an ongoing work of God in the life of a Christian. And as we read this morning, it is what God commands us as his people. Holiness is God’s revealed will for his people.

1 Thes. 4:1 “Finally then, brethren, we urge and exhort in the Lord Jesus that you should abound more and more, just as you received from us how you ought to walk and to please God; 2 for you know what commandments we gave you through the Lord

Jesus. 3 For this is the will of God, your sanctification.”

Your holiness! That is the will of God for you. So with that in mind, let’s look more closely at what Peter has to say about holiness, beginning with,

I. THE ORIGIN OIF HOLINESS.

And that is easy to define. God is the origin of holiness. Verse 15, “as he who called you is holy...” Or as the NASB puts it, rather well, “...like the Holy One who called you...” So whatever we say about holiness, however you define holiness, you have to begin with God.

A. God is the definition of holiness.

In trying to define holiness, let me start out as broadly as possible. The basic idea of holiness is separation. Or being set apart. That’s what sanctified means, and it is why sanctification and holiness are synonyms. They mean the same thing. To be holy is to be set part from others. And God is holy in the ultimate sense. God is by his very essence separate and distinct from all his creatures. He is God, and there is no other. He is God, eternal and unchangeable. We are finite, mortal creatures. And that is the definition of his holiness. God is holy because he alone existed at the beginning of the world. God is holy because he alone is the same, yesterday, today and forever.

Rev. 4:8 “Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord God Almighty, who was and is and is to come.”

Similarly, we read about God in,

Ex. 15:11 “Who is like You, O LORD, among the gods? Who is like You, glorious in holiness, Fearful in praises, doing wonders? 12 You stretched out Your right hand; The earth swallowed them. 13 You in Your mercy have led forth The people

whom You have redeemed; You have guided them in Your strength To Your holy habitation.”

“Who is like You, O LORD, among the gods?” And the answer, no one. We will get much more specific very soon, but that’s where I want to begin. It’s all about God. God is at the center of every attempt to define and understand holiness. And we know this about God from,

Is. 57:15 “For thus says the One who is high and lifted up, who inhabits eternity, whose name is Holy: “I dwell in the high and holy place.”

But God is not distant from his creatures. That’s what makes the one, true God different from the false gods of every other religion, perhaps most especially Islam. God is holy, separate and distinct from all his creatures. God inhabits eternity, he lives in the high and holy place which we call “heaven.” But Isaiah 57 continues,

Is. 57:15 “I dwell in the high and holy place, and also with him who is of a contrite and lowly spirit, to revive the spirit of the lowly, and to revive the heart of the contrite.”

So I should emphasize at this point that this God who himself is the definition of holiness,

B. God calls us to salvation.

So Peter doesn’t simply say, in the abstract, “God is holy.” He says,

v.15 “...but as He who called you is holy...”

“Calling” there is a direct reference to salvation. It is what our confession and catechism label as effectual calling. For example,

Eph. 4:1 “I therefore, a prisoner for the Lord, urge you to walk

in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called.”

So that is where we start, the origin of holiness. That’s the foundation for understanding holiness. God. God is holy, separate and distinct from everything he has created. But nonetheless, he calls us to salvation. So what does holiness mean for us? What is,

II. THE PRACTICAL DEFINITION OF HOLINESS.

In other words, what is the application of this to our lives? What does holiness mean for you in your day to day life?

Peter begins with a very obvious and helpful reference to your conduct, verse 15. Your behavior. The original King James puts it, “in all manner of conversation.” The consistent use of the Greek word refers to the whole manner of the conduct of your life, especially in relation to other people. So either behavior or conduct is a good translation.

A. Holiness refers to your behavior.

How you live. The nitty, gritty details of your life.

Holiness does not have some mysterious or even mystical definition. It does not refer to some sort of ecstatic experience or emotional sensation. To be most clear and most specific holiness is nothing other than obedience. Holiness means obeying the law of God. Holiness means putting to death the sin of disobedience, putting off the old man and putting on the new man. Holiness is the righteousness of your life, righteousness defined by God.

So what is holiness of life? Honoring those in authority over you. Honoring the lives of others, causing others no harm or injury. Holiness is sexual purity, keeping pure the marriage bed. Holiness is the honesty and integrity to work hard, not stealing.

Holiness is being truthful. And being content with what you have so that you don't covet.

Those are, of course, references to the ten commandments. Holiness of life, the conduct of holiness is living your life in obedience to the revealed will of God expressed in his law. In general terms, that means this, according to,

Eph. 4:20 "But you have not so learned Christ, 21 if indeed you have heard Him and have been taught by Him, as the truth is in Jesus: 22 that you put off, concerning your former conduct, the old man which grows corrupt according to the deceitful lusts, 23 and be renewed in the spirit of your mind, 24 and that you put on the new man which was created according to God, in true righteousness and holiness."

Consider also,

Rom. 6:17 "But God be thanked that though you were slaves of sin, yet you obeyed from the heart that form of doctrine to which you were delivered. 18 And having been set free from sin, you became slaves of righteousness. 19 I speak in human terms because of the weakness of your flesh. For just as you presented your members as slaves of uncleanness, and of lawlessness leading to more lawlessness, so now present your members as slaves of righteousness for holiness. 20 For when you were slaves of sin, you were free in regard to righteousness. 21 What fruit did you have then in the things of which you are now ashamed? For the end of those things is death. 22 But now having been set free from sin, and having become slaves of God, you have your fruit to holiness, and the end, everlasting life."

Turn with me, please to,

1 Thes. 4:1 "Finally then, brethren, we urge and exhort in the Lord Jesus that you should abound more and more, just as you received from us how you ought to walk and to please God; 2 for

you know what commandments we gave you through the Lord Jesus. 3 For this is the will of God, your [holiness]... 7 For God did not call us to uncleanness, but in holiness."

So God did not simply call you to salvation. He called you to be holy. And the practical definition of that is the holiness of your behavior. That you should yourselves to be set apart from the world, holy. That you show yourselves to be different from the unbelievers of this world who live according to their flesh.

Look again at 1 Thes. 4, as verse 3 continues with an even more specific example.

1 Thes. 4:3 "For this is the will of God, your sanctification: that you should abstain from sexual immorality; 4 that each of you should know how to possess his own vessel in sanctification and honor, 5 not in passion of lust, like the Gentiles who do not know God."

So one commandment is brought to the forefront, the 7th commandment. And that emphasis gives us the clear understanding that,

B. Holiness refers to the purity of your life.

There are other examples of purity, but none so obvious. And none so crucial as the purity of your body.

1 Cor. 3:16 "Do you not know that you are the temple of God and that the Spirit of God dwells in you? 17 If anyone defiles the temple of God, God will destroy him. For the temple of God is holy, which temple you are."

Holiness is such a very practical concept. It means self-control in the matter of physical, sexual purity. After all, we are not mere animals governed by instinct. We are created in the image of God to reflect his image of holiness. "For God did not

call us to uncleanness, but in holiness.”

And what does that mean? That whether you are married or not, you keep the marriage bed pure.

Heb. 13:4 “Let marriage be held in honor among all, and let the marriage bed be undefiled, for God will judge the sexually immoral and adulterous.”

God calls us to preserve the sanctity of marriage by your faithfulness. In mind and body. In thoughts and desires. That’s holiness. What is prohibited is adultery, for those who are married; fornication for those who are not married. Just because everyone else is doing it, God’s people are to be different, holy.

So if you are not married, that means self-control, abstinence. In mind as well as body, for “God did not call us to uncleanness, but in holiness.” So put to death unclean thoughts, especially the impurity presented and stimulated by pornography. If that is a struggle you experience, then hear this call to holiness loud and clear. Pornography is a scourge upon purity of God’s people today, seemingly just as prevalent among Christians as non-Christians. And it is destroying marriages, it is destroying lives, and it is destroying minds. Because the will of God is the purity of your mind and body, “that you should abstain from sexual immorality” in every form.

So where there is sin, repent. Where there is impurity, turn from it. If it is pornography, you may well need to get help. Please ask for it. For,

1 Thes. 4:3 “For this is the will of God, your [holiness]: that you should abstain from sexual immorality; 4 that each of you should know how to possess his own vessel in sanctification and honor, 5 not in passion of lust, like the Gentiles who do not know God.”

2 Cor. 7:1 “Therefore, having these promises, beloved, let us cleanse ourselves from all filthiness of the flesh and spirit, perfecting holiness in the fear of God.”

Let me move on, then, to speak for a few minutes about,

III. THE MOTIVATION OF HOLINESS.

What is the motivation? How can we put all of this in the context of the gospel, and not fall into the trap of legalism? My goal is to challenge you to pursue holiness in the most practical way possible, to pursue purity, to cleanse yourself from all filthiness and uncleanness. But what is the motivation? How can I define the context by which you actually respond well, without being exasperated or overwhelmed?

Two answers to those questions. Two additional things to fully understand about holiness. First,

A. Holiness is how you work out your salvation.

And I get that from,

v.16

Where did Peter get that quote from? Turn with me please to, Lev. 11:44 “For I am the Lord your God. You shall therefore consecrate yourselves, and you shall be holy; for I am holy. Neither shall you defile yourselves with any creeping thing that creeps on the earth. 45 For I am the Lord who brings you up out of the land of Egypt, to be your God. You shall therefore be holy, for I am holy.”

Notice how this command to holiness is related to the redemption which God has already provided for his people. God has already saved his people Israel. He has already delivered them out of the land of Egypt. God has already declared himself

to be their God, and called them to be his people. And on that basis, God says, “You shall therefore be holy, for I am holy.”

So holiness is how you work out your salvation! Holiness is how you demonstrate the reality of your salvation.

Similarly,

Lev. 20:7 “Consecrate yourselves therefore, and be holy, for I am the Lord your God. 8 And you shall keep My statutes, and perform them: I am the Lord who sanctifies you.”

God calls us, God sets us apart from the world. God sanctifies you. Therefore, “Consecrate yourselves therefore, and be holy, for I am the Lord your God.”

So work out your salvation with fear and trembling, Paul would write to the Philippians. Work out your salvation, the salvation which God has already accomplished. And there is the motivation, the confidence of your salvation.

Lev. 11:45 “For I am the Lord who brings you up out of the land of Egypt, to be your God. You shall therefore be holy, for I am holy.”

2 Cor. 7:1 “Therefore, having these promises, beloved, let us cleanse ourselves from all filthiness of the flesh and spirit, perfecting holiness in the fear of God.”

If you are a Christian, then God has saved you. And if God has saved you, then listen to his own words, “Be holy, for I am holy.”

One final, related thought in terms of motivation for holiness.

B. Holiness is how you demonstrate that you belong to God.

Again, verse 16. If you want to understand holiness, you have to understand Leviticus. And the purpose for holiness, with all of the Old Covenant ceremonial applications of holiness related to diet and clothing, the overarching point is that holiness demonstrates that you have been set apart to God, that you belong to God. So back to Leviticus 11, and ask the question, why? Why all these regulations? And the answer is, to identify the people of God in distinction from the people of the world. That’s why there were so many regulations regarding what was clear and what was unclean.

That’s holiness, being set apart from the world. Being different from the world. And that becomes the motivation for you and for me today, that you pursue holiness in order to demonstrate that you belong to God. We see that principle most clearly in,

Lev. 20:24 But I have said to you, “You shall inherit their land, and I will give it to you to possess, a land flowing with milk and honey.” I am the Lord your God, who has separated you from the peoples. 25 You shall therefore distinguish between clean animals and unclean, between unclean birds and clean, and you shall not make yourselves abominable by beast or by bird, or by any kind of living thing that creeps on the ground, which I have separated from you as unclean. 26 And you shall be holy to Me, for I the Lord am holy, and have separated you from the peoples, that you should be Mine.”

Holiness means that you as a Christian are distinguished from non-Christians, that you belong to God.

So the question begins this way, “Do you belong to God?” In other words, “Has God saved you?” And if he has, then let that confidence be your motivation to pursue holiness.

Where you have failed, then confess your sin, with godly sorrow. And turn from it in repentance. Turn to Jesus, whose blood washes your sin away. And then, listen to God speak to you today,

v.15 "...as He who called you is holy, you also be holy in all your conduct, 16 because it is written, "Be holy, for I am holy."

2 Cor. 7:1 "Therefore, having these promises, beloved, let us cleanse ourselves from all filthiness of the flesh and spirit, perfecting holiness in the fear of God."

1 Thes. 4:3 "For this is the will of God, your [holiness]."