

Grace-filled Goals for Christian Living

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[0 : 0 0] Please have a seat, everyone. Good morning. Good to see you this morning.! I wonder whether you are a goal-driven person or not. Some people are a goal-driven person. Some people are striving towards goals, daily goals, lifelong goals. Some less so and are more content just to see where life takes them. Either way, I think it's quite hard to escape the fact that we live in a culture that is very goal-driven. From an early age, children go to school and their teachers get them thinking about the next level. What's coming next? What do you need to aim for next? Then they get to their teenage years and it's kind of like, let's get thinking about careers. Then we get to work and we realise that work is full of goals and targets we have to meet. What we do is we find targets around work-life balance and well-being to counter those targets we get in the workplace. Some goals are just kind of a personal achievement. Yesterday morning at the local park run, there was a chap who was 82 years old. He got a shout out for running his 350th park run. I just wanted to say, mate, just put your feet up, chill out, you know. Surely at 82, he can stop chasing those targets, but good for him. A colleague I once line managed, he used to always say in his appraisal cycle that his main goal, his main target, was to retire as soon as possible. We have that conversation every year. His voice kind of represented the jaded, perhaps cynical viewpoint of someone surrounded by this culture of target setting and self-improvement. But of course, goals are good, but they can give us a purpose, something to aim for, that they're a tool for motivation.

And some goals are really worthwhile. Think about goals that help others, that help build communities. But some, when you kind of scratch below the surface, are a little bit focused on self. In this next section of Peter's letter, having painted this glorious picture of what Christians have in Christ, if you look back to the section we looked at a couple of weeks ago, an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade in verse 4, Peter sets about explaining to these scattered Christians living in different parts of modern-day Turkey what they should be striving for as they live out their lives as strangers, as he calls them back in verse 1. These are Christians who are who are beginning to suffer persecution for their faith, low-level persecution. I think James a couple of weeks ago helpfully called it subtle suffering. They're beginning to be slandered and marginalized, and there's a temptation for these Christians to keep their heads down and just blend in with the crowd. And so, in this passage, Peter begins to apply what living out the truths of that first part of the chapter look like. And these goals that Peter sets in this passage to these Christians are pretty ambitious.

Let's quickly look at them, if we pick them out one by one. Verse 15, be holy in all you do. Verse 17, live out your time in reverent fear. Verse 22, love each other deeply from the heart.

[4 : 1 0] But what makes Peter's instructions to these Christians so appealing is that he embeds them in the reasoning which makes them possible and actually desirable to achieve. There's a kind of cause and effect in these commands that they're surrounded by a logic that is deeply rooted in the gospel of Jesus Christ.

And it's so important as we head into this passage that we realize that. Without the kind of rich gospel context presented here by Peter, this call to Christian living can slip into, at best, a kind of dubious motivation for doing good, and at worst, a sense of moralism that destroys our souls, or crushing levels of guilt.

And so, to try and explain what I mean by that, I want to reframe Peter's goals for Christian living as a call to look forward, to look up, and to look back.

To look forward, to look up, and to look back. First of all, to look forward. What does Peter mean by that? Now, the first part of this chapter picks up on this idea, and Peter continues it in this second half of chapter one.

It's why he starts in verse 13 with the word, therefore, there's a link to what's come before. We have an inheritance kept in heaven for us.

[5 : 50] Peter's made it clear that each of us that are trusting and following Jesus has something waiting for us that we can scarcely comprehend.

As we'll see later, our salvation is achieved in the past, but its completion is waiting in the future, stored up in heaven for us, verse 5.

It will be fully revealed when Jesus is revealed. We'll then get to see the hope that we currently have. And in our passage, it's almost as if Peter anticipates his readers not fully grasping this, so he repeats it in a slightly different way.

Verse 13, Therefore, with minds that are alert and fully sober, set your hope on the grace to be brought to you when Jesus Christ is revealed at his coming.

The inheritance described in verse 4 is now described as God's grace, a lavish expression of God's generosity to us.

[7 : 02] We've had a taste, and we're going to get a whole lot more. And when we see Christ, that grace will complete us so that we no longer wrestle with doubts or struggle with sin.

Looking forward to that? When we know that's the prospect ahead of us, why wouldn't we want to have minds that are alert to the reality of this promise?

It is a promise that is too good to miss. Our Bible uses the phrase, with minds that are alert, which is an update on the old phrase, gird up your loins.

Heard of that one? This is a reference to those long robes that were worn at the time. They might look good, but not so handy when you had to get stuck into some hard work.

So they'll be kind of gathered up between your legs as a sign that you were ready for action and focused. If you want a modern day example, I had to wrap my brains for this.

[8 : 09] It's the competitive mum at sports day. Is that you? Who walks kind of casually to the start line for the parents' race, wearing a kind of long, flowing summer Bowdoin dress, and then hoicks it up under starter's orders, sprints to the end, destroys the field.

She is on a mission. Or maybe, more poignantly, it's the image from Passover night. Remember that in the book of Exodus?

The events of the Israelites escaping from Egypt, where they were in captivity in the Old Testament. In Exodus 12, verse 11, the Israelites are told to eat the Passover meal with their cloaks tucked into their belts, their sandals on their feet, and their staffs in their hand.

This was liberation night, the night that they would escape slavery out of Egypt and start their journey to the promised land. They were ready to get up and to get out as they ate that meal together.

In the same way, with our glorious inheritance ahead of us, we're called to keep our minds alert, prepared, and sober, it says.

[9 : 27] Minds that are clear, as we wait in hope and confident expectation. The reference to being sober here is not, I think, a direct reference to alcohol, but I think it serves as quite a useful picture.

Too much alcohol, of course, does not keep us alert. It blurs our senses. It gives permission for sin to creep in and distract us, to distract us from the grace that's going to be revealed to us.

Being sober means our thoughts about our future destination are free from these outside influences that can knock us off course. I wonder what those influences are for you.

those things that can turn us away from our future destination. Peter is calling us to look forward, to keep our eyes on the goal of our inheritance, and if we do that, I think our priorities will be changed. But then, Peter calls us to look up, verses 14 to 16. I'm sure that most of you are familiar with the story of Oliver Twist in some kind of form, yeah?

[10 : 47] Maybe a film. At the end of that novel, Oliver is adopted by Mr. Brownlow. He's gone from a workhouse to a funeral parlour where he's mistreated out onto the streets.

He joins Fagin's criminal gang. And at the end, he's rescued, he's taken into a household that's got wealth, and his future becomes so different to his past.

Imagine if a Hollywood scriptwriter got hold of that story and said, you know what, I'm going to write a sequel, Oliver Twist, part two, and what I'm going to do is I'm going to get Oliver to go back to the streets, and he's going to hook up with Fagin's gang again.

We'd think that absurd, right? Well, Peter here reminds us that as Christians, it would be crazy for us to go back to what we once were, what we thought, and maybe, you know, how we acted at

times.

Look at verse four. As obedient children, do not conform to the evil desires you had when you lived in ignorance. Don't turn back.

[11:58] You've been called out of that previous way of life. You've been given this new identity. Just as Oliver is now in the household of this caring Mr. Brownlow who stepped into his life and rescued him, so we now are children children of the living and holy God.

We've been rescued from our sin, and we have a new father. And our new father, who called us out of that situation, asks us to imitate him.

Verse 15, Holiness.

It's one of those words, isn't it? I kind of struggle, if I'm honest, to think of many, if any positive associations with that word today. If I threw that word out onto the street and asked questions about it, what would I get back?

Holier than thou. Yeah, an attitude of moral superiority. Hypocrisy in religious leaders who say one thing and do another.

[13:18] Being rigid and unapproachable. The list goes on. So I think we need to see these words from Peter through a different lens, which I think is only really possible when our hearts have been changed.

Holiness really means to be set apart, as we were singing about this morning. And that quality is most often used to describe God. There are well over 100 direct references to God's holiness in the Bible.

So Google tells me. And that's because his holiness is associated with the way that he acts. So he's set apart and distinctive in mercy.

He's set apart and distinctive in love. He's set apart and distinctive in power, in his patience, in his faithfulness, his wisdom, his grace, his justice.

He is set apart. And God's holiness in the Old Testament is seen when the Israelites are kept from him because his holiness is so overwhelming, it would consume sinful people.

[14:34] His moral distance from us means that Israelites just couldn't stand before him. Even in the tabernacle and then later in the temple, barriers were kind of set up in different forms to prevent, really, and protect people from the holiness.

In the New Testament, of course, God's holiness is revealed to us in Jesus. Hebrews is good for this. The book of Hebrews, we read this, that Jesus is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being.

God's holiness comes close to humanity in the person of Jesus, approachable, yet still fully divine.

In Jesus, God kind of removes the walls of his apartness, if that's a word, and instead he calls us to share in it. So as we acknowledge our lack of holiness and recognize his holiness found in Christ, in turn, we are made holy.

And Hebrews helps us again with this. Chapter 10, verse 10 of Hebrews. As Christians, we have been made holy through the sacrifice of the body of Jesus Christ once and for all.

[16:00] So Peter here is simply saying, just live out who you are in Christ. As Christians, we have the privilege of being made to be like our Father in heaven.

So the book we're studying at the moment in community groups, which I hope you're enjoying, near the start of there, there's a really helpful table that shows qualities about God that we can't share, even though we tried to.

We were just not designed to share them. So his power, his knowledge, his unchangeability, but it also shows what we can grow towards, his love, his compassion, his mercy, and his holiness.

It's on the list. Kathy Keller, she's the wife of the preacher, Tim Keller, writes this, that there are attributes of God that we can catch if we draw close to him through his word, through our prayer, through our experience of living with him in our circumstances.

And how do we do that? We look up and we imitate. Be holy because I am holy. We won't find it by looking anywhere else.

[17:20] Sons who love their fathers often morph into them. And they're shaped by their characters. So as Christians, we are declared holy.

We are declared holy. Let's look to our Father and mirror his distinctive love and try and catch his faithfulness, his mercy, his patience, his grace, his compassion.

I wonder, what's your motivation for being holy? Do you have a motivation for being holy? Have you even thought about your faith in those terms before?

I'd really encourage you, either way, to head to the cross of Christ. There's an opportunity in a bit. We're going to share communion together. I think the only way to change your motivation in this area is to head to the foot of the cross.

The extent to which we'll pursue holiness is in direct proportion to how much we understand our sin costs Jesus. The extent to which we'll pursue holiness is in direct proportion to how much we understand our sin costs Jesus.

[18 : 43] And lastly, let's look at this last little section which I've called look back, look forward, look up, look back.

Verses 17 to 21. So having fixed their eyes on the destination, Peter actually then does a whole 180 and he turns his readers around to look back at the past.

And in particular, he focuses them on that cost that I just referred to of their salvation. Verse 18. For you know that it was not with perishable things such as gold or silver that you were redeemed from the empty way of life handed down to you from your ancestors but with the precious blood of Christ, a lamb without blemish or defect.

the price of our salvation and our freedom was more really than we can fully understand. Gold and silver, we can kind of relate to those terms, precious and valuable as they are, are nothing in comparison to the cost to God the Father.

It's the blood of his son. And what was most precious to him was freely given. And the wonder of the cross is that Jesus went there completely innocently.

[20 : 11] It says, without blemish or defect. His holiness was clear for all to see and yet he was tortured and crucified. And it says in verse 20, for our sake, for you, for me, Peter's emphasis here is on what it cost.

I think Peter had his head firmly in the book of Exodus when he was writing this letter. We've seen that once already, but in this section there are more of those echoes of Passover night.

On that night, God's people, the Israelites, were instructed to sacrifice a lamb without blemish and to smear blood over the doorposts as a sign.

And the judgment of God passed over all the households but caused devastation in those Egyptian households as the firstborn sons were struck down.

If you put yourself in the shoes of a 12-year-old Israelite eldest son on that Passover night, your dad comes in and he says he's heard from an elder who's heard from Moses that there's his plan.

[21 : 29] We need to smear blood over the doorframe as a means of protection. You sit down with your family to eat that meal. How are you feeling as you go off to bed?

Do you go to bed? And then you hear loud wailing from across the street coming from neighboring houses after midnight and you escape with your family in the dark.

What might his response be? Well I think his response might help us interpret the command that we read in verse 17. Since you call on a father who judges each person's work impartially, live out your time as foreigners here in reverent fear.

As that boy, a foreigner in Egypt, rushed out of that country with his family that night. What might his understanding of God be?

Immense gratitude for sure that this son escaped the fate of Egyptian eldest sons. But I think there would be a sense of reverence and awe too.

[22 : 42] God's power and judgment and his protection and provision combine that night in the most awe-inspiring but devastating circumstances.

As we live as Christians today, I think a reverent fear of the Lord is healthy. A few chapters later in Exodus when they're at Mount Sinai and they get the Ten Commandments, Moses says to God's people, the fear of God, sorry, the fear of the Lord will be with you to keep you from sinning.

Peter's called on these Christians to be alert and part of that I think is recognizing the full character of God. There is a reverent fear of God that doesn't contradict our confidence in our salvation.

So a confident driver out there on the roads has a healthy fear of the dangers on the road. So look forward to Jesus' return, look up to God our Father and look backwards to the cross.

So Peter simply says we are to travel confidently with a focus and in a way which honors God and then we'll become more and more distinctive.

[24 : 09] We'll be recognized as a small but significant reflection of our Father's holiness and that is attractive. Peter's going to pick up on this in the next chapter when he explains that this type of living stands out.

Those good works will be noticed and it's therefore apt that the first of these that he picks up on is the love we show to those around us.

Look at verse 21. Now that you've purified yourselves by obeying the truth so that you've sincere love for each other love one another deeply from the heart.

This call to love is a natural consequence of the pursuit of holiness and there seems to be some kind of sequence here if you look at it. Purified obey the truth sincere love deep love.

love comes in lots of different forms and there's something distinctive though about Christian love because it's born as Christians are born through the gospel of Jesus.

[25 : 19] When we've been given the riches that Peter describes in the first part of this chapter if you flick back great mercy new birth living hope an unspoilable inheritance it begins to alter the way that we see others we begin to show to others what we've been shown ourselves and I see it here at Bethel outworked in each of you since becoming a church leader here a few years ago I've had several conversations with people who've been to Bethel on and off over the years some Christians some not and they can see this love demonstrated in very distinctive ways and it's been really attractive to them and I'm thinking in particular of one family who we got to know quite well about two or three years ago that they came that they left they came back they left again their church background was very very different to ours but they were torn and the reason and they told me this many many times was because they were drawn by the love shown to them every time they turned up by different people in this church they saw this outworking of holiness in you and it really appealed to them

I'm not saying that's the experience for everybody and if that doesn't resonate with you this morning then we'd love to know how we can love you better but we do have cause to rejoice I think that over many years in this church many many years way before my time that Peter's call to love one another deeply from the heart has been taken so seriously by Christians in this church I mentioned goals and targets earlier maybe after all this passage doesn't really fall into that category don't get me wrong that there's commands here for us to follow as we live our lives as Christians but they're so deeply embedded in what we've been given in Christ that for me as I've been reading this passage over and over again in the last few weeks they become more of an inviting call from Christ himself through the words of

Peter to live in the light of his grace as Jesus commits 100% to bringing us home to him if this morning there's just a small piece of what has been said and what's being offered in this passage that sounds different to the normal humdrum of modern life something that you like the sound of or intrigued by please don't walk away from it just chat to one of us and we can talk to you in more detail and if you're here this morning as a Christian but you're feeling a bit unsettled maybe by some criticism maybe from within your family or in the workplace as we try to be distinctive I think it's all the more important that we have an anchor that grounds us in the midst of our challenges over the summer we went to the

Keswick convention which is a big bible conference in the late district first time we'd ever been with thousands of other Christians and the speaker there gave this really helpful analogy that has just kind of stuck with me since so I'm going to shamelessly nick it from him as we close in hot climates as young sunflowers are beginning to bud at the early stages of their growth they're seeking to grow tall and what they do is they track the sun it's got a name I had to look it up apparently it's called heliotropism as the sun appears in the east the young plants fixes its eyes its face its buds firmly on the source of light and life and as the day passes the young flower tracks that source up and over and keeps watching it until sunset and it does the same the next day and the next day and it begins to grow tall set your hope on the grace to be brought to you when Jesus

Christ is revealed let's pray father god thank you that we can see you as a holy holy god a loving god who is distinctive and set apart from ourselves but father thank you through the person of Jesus you draw close to us and lord help us to see that peter's words here are an encouragement to us to live out our identity that we've already been given at the cross by the sacrifice and through the sacrifice of the lord Jesus father we want to praise you this morning for the gospel of Jesus Christ and we want to look to you as we grow into the people you want us to be amen amen