

Gospel Holiness

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[0 : 00] It's good to see you this morning. If you missed Pastor Matt's announcement at the very start of the service about the city parking ban, let me remind you, if you parked on the street, there's a chance you may get towed.

I'll read the scripture passage really slowly to give you a chance to go move your car if you need to, but there's a parking garage right behind us. You can get to it right off of Autobahn or off of Orange Street.

So we did park on the street this morning. We wouldn't want you to get towed, so just a reminder about that. But our sermon text this morning is 1 Peter 1, 13-21. And I think that's on page 953 in the Pew Bible in front of you.

If you'd like to turn there and have it open in front of you throughout the course of our sermon this morning. 1 Peter 1, verses 13-21. All right, let me read this for us.

The Apostle Peter says this. He says, Therefore, preparing your minds for action and being sober-minded, set your hope fully on the grace that will be brought to you at the revelation of Jesus Christ.

[1 : 01] 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. 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, 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.

He was foreknown before the foundation of the world, but was made manifest in the last times for the sake of you, 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.

Let's pray together. Father, as we come to these words from the Apostle Peter to the first century church, we thank you that by your spirit you continue to speak to us through these apostolic words. Jesus, thank you for continuing to shepherd your church throughout this time. And we pray that as we meditate on this passage this morning, you would do that work of shepherding and loving and comforting and guiding for the sake of your people and for the sake of your name, we pray this.

[2 : 26] Amen. So, when we look at the history of the early church, we see something pretty amazing, actually. As the message about Jesus' death and resurrection went forth in those first centuries, it created communities that were radically distinct from the surrounding Roman culture.

Something obviously and apparently knew was being created. Larry Hurtado, who's a historian of the first few centuries of the common area of the church, he wrote a book recently called Destroyer of the Gods, Early Christian Distinctiveness in the Roman World.

And what he does in that book is trace how Christian communities were really, really different and really distinct from the Roman context in which they lived. And he traces a number of different ways in which the church was different.

Well, how so? Well, there was a number of ways. You know, in a culture where kind of taking care of your family or taking care of your own tribe was the priority, Christians, surprisingly, cared for the poor and cared for the marginalized no matter what their background.

Also, in a culture where your religion was basically kind of a product of your upbringing, Christianity in distinction was radically multi-ethnic and multi-racial. Anyone could join this new movement, this new family around Jesus.

[3 : 45] And in a culture where honor and shame led to sort of long-standing grudges and rivalries, Christians, in distinction from that, were committed to forgiveness and non-retaliation.

Many Christians dying for their faith in those early years, yet forgiving their persecutors. And there's more. In a culture where infanticide was acceptable and children were often sold into slavery, Christians practiced this radical hospitality and this radical commitment to life, standing against abortion, caring for unwanted children, taking them in.

And in a culture where sex was seen kind of as an appetite that could be fulfilled in any way as long as it sort of upheld the social order, Christians, in distinction from that, held this radically different view of sex even, that it was part of an exclusive covenant between a man and a woman in a way that pictured God's union with his people, a life-producing union across fundamental difference.

Okay, now why are we talking about all this? Why am I talking about all the ways in which Christians were distinct and different from their surrounding culture when it came to things like race and sex and class and life and forgiveness? Well, this distinction, this difference, is what Peter's talking about in our passage when he talks about holiness.

holiness. The central point of this paragraph in 1 Peter is verse 15 where he says, be holy in all your conduct. Now, I don't know what comes to mind for you when you think of the word holy.

[5 : 23] Maybe you get a picture of some sort of super spiritual, oddly dressed guru who's very holy. Or maybe you think of some kind of overly meticulous, self-righteous bore, you know, the kind of person you really don't ever want to invite over for dinner.

But, you know, when the Bible uses the word holy, the root of that word means something that's distinct. It's set apart. And just as God is supremely distinct, just as God is supremely distinct in beauty and goodness and truth, so Peter says we should be holy.

If we were to paraphrase verses 14 through 16, we might put it this way. Peter's saying, look, don't go back to living like you used to. You know, you didn't know any better and your passion simply ruled your life and you just conformed to everyone around you.

But he says, instead, live now in the beautiful distinction of God's own character. Mirror his goodness in everything that you do.

be holy. And notice, being holy isn't just something Christians are supposed to do on Sundays. Peter says, be holy in all your conduct.

[6 : 43] And that's what we see in the early church. We see Christians together mirroring God's goodness and how they treat the poor and how they embrace one another across racial and ethnic difference and how they respond to others when people wrong them or harm them and how they care for life in all of its forms and how they approach sex and marriage.

all of it, all of life, it's meant to be distinct. But Peter knows that that's a challenge, right?

Because conformity, which he mentions in verse 14, conformity is always easier than holiness. In other words, it will always be easier to conform to our culture.

It will always be easier to conform to our old habits and passions than to live in the beautiful distinction of God's goodness. So Peter spends most of this paragraph, actually, helping us to see how.

How can we actually do it even though it's hard? And to summarize, he says, you can do it because, he says, you have a new future and he says, you have a new father and he says, you have a new freedom.

[7 : 55] In other words, Peter says, live holy lives because your relationship to the future has changed and because your relationship to God has changed and because even your relationship to your past has changed.

So that's what we're going to look at this morning, those three things that Peter says as to how we can actually live into this holiness. So let's look first at how our relationship to the future has changed.

In verse 13, Peter says, you have a whole new future. Therefore, preparing your minds for action and being sober-minded, set your hope fully on the grace that will be brought to you at the revelation of Jesus Christ.

Now, I think most of us have our hope set on something, right? There's some future outcome that you're banking on or that you're aiming for.

Maybe you hope one day to get married or maybe you hope to start a business or maybe you hope to travel the world or cure a disease or raise a few kids. What is it for you?

[8 : 57] What's the happy outcome? What's the hope? Now, none of these things are necessarily bad things to hope for, to aim for. But if we're not careful, good hopes can become ultimate hopes.

Our hearts can start to believe that they are necessary for our joy. We can begin by saying something like, well, I'd like to one day, but then end up saying, I must have one day.

You see the difference? And of course, the thing that becomes your ultimate hope, well, that's the thing that ultimately rules your life, right? If you set your hope fully on getting married, then you'll do whatever it takes to get a spouse, even if they're not really the person you should marry.

Or if you set your hope fully on career success, then you won't be able to say no when your boss is expecting too many hours from you or when you're asked to do something that goes against your conscience.

And that's why Peter says, we have to prepare our minds for action and be sober-minded. Now, literally, he says, gird up the loins of your mind.

[10 : 16] This is a great picture, isn't it? And this image, it's from the ancient world when people wore sort of long robes, right? But if you were going into battle or if you're getting ready to do some kind of physical activity, you couldn't have some super long robe getting in your way.

So you'd take it and you would fold it up and you would sort of wrap it around your waist and you would tie it, you would gird it around your loins and then you'd be ready to go. You were ready for action. You'd gird up your loins. In the Old Testament, God actually told the Israelites to gird up their loins on the night of the Exodus.

Be ready for action, God said, because your liberation is coming and you'll need to go tonight. So Peter's saying here that like the Israelites on the night of the Passover, we have to be ready for action.

We have to set our hope fully on the only thing that won't enslave us or entrap us. We have to gird up the loins of our minds and set our hope fully on that one thing that won't make us a slave.

And what is that? He says, it's the coming grace of our Lord Jesus. You see, for Christians, our hope isn't ultimately in a marriage partner or financial success or any of those things.

[11 : 27] Our ultimate hope, our ultimate happiness is what's coming in God's future grace. Now, I know sometimes when we think about the future God has in store for his people, it doesn't really thrill our hearts, does it?

I read a book this past week that sort of said, you know, when we think about God's future, we often think of it sort of like the waiting room at the dentist. It's calm.

There's soothing instrumental music. Everything's really clean. Some people are wearing white even. You know, this is sort of what we think of when we think of heaven, when we think of the new heavens and the new earth.

But that's not what God has in store. Peter actually uses the metaphor that we just saw in the last couple of weeks. He uses the metaphor of an inheritance. Now, imagine you get a letter in the mail one day that seems to be from a reputable law office telling you that a distant relative has left you their entire estate.

And it's not just a large life-changing sum of money, but a house and a fairly large piece of property in the south of France. I think you'd be a little more excited about that than visiting the waiting room of your dentist, right?

[12 : 45] Of course you would. And when Peter says you have an inheritance, he means something even more thrilling than an estate in the south of France.

He's talking about a place in the new heavens and the new earth when God will continue to extend his infinite creativity and beauty through us as image bearers as we reign with him forever.

But as we reign with him forever in a world that's finally set free from decay and death and loss. And remember, Peter's saying that this is the first key to holy living.

Set your hope on this future grace. grace. Then you won't be controlled or ruled by lesser hopes.

Then, like the early Christians, you can be generous to the poor even when it's hard because the future grace of your coming inheritance makes earthly wealth in this life pale in comparison.

You have an inheritance that's coming. Future grace. So why not be generous now? You don't need to hold on to your money so tightly. And like the early Christians, you can live a single celibate life with contentment and joy even when it's hard because the future grace of your coming union with Christ makes earthly marriage pale in comparison.

[14:17] You don't have to seek something out in this life because you know what's coming is so much better. So Peter wants us to see that this new future that we have in the gospel, this inheritance, this grace that's coming.

This is the first thing that empowers our holy living and we can gird up the loins of our mind and we can set our hope fully on it and it won't disappoint us. The second thing he points out though is not just that we have a new future but that we have a new father.

It's not just our relationship to the future that's changed, it's our relationship with God, he says. Now notice how Peter implies this in verses 14 through 16. If you look back at those verses, Peter is saying, he's saying, just like children imitate their parents in obedience, so you Christians, now that you are children of God, imitate your heavenly father.

Be holy like he is holy. And then he says 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.

Remember, exile is sort of Peter's way of talking about this Christian life, our pilgrimage to the new heavens and the new earth. Now this verse takes some explaining, verse 17. It sort of sounds at first like Peter's saying, okay, don't forget, your heavenly father is a merciless judge, so you better be holy or else.

[15:48] But I don't think that's what Peter means. I don't think he's trying to scare Christians into obedience. Now, of course, it is true that God will judge the works that believers have done in this life, and it is true that there will be varying levels of reward in heaven.

Remember Jesus' parable of the talents, right? But none of that means that we're saved by our good works. Think about it. If I ask my kids to go clean their rooms, right, I might give them varying levels of praise depending on how good of a job they did.

But that doesn't mean I'm expecting them to earn their status as my children based on how well they tidy up. That would raise the stakes, wouldn't it, for cleaning the room?

And it's the same in the gospel, friends. We're adopted into God's family completely and solely by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone. That's how we get into the family and that's what keeps us secure.

So what does Peter mean in verse 17 then? I think he means something like this. The impartial judge of the universe, God, who has every right to bring our lives to account, this judge is now your father.

[17:13] the one whose perfect judgment will bring the world to its knees. This God has chosen to embrace you with the tender strength of a perfect father.

The one who is judge you now call on as your father. And how should that impact us? Well, Peter says it ought to provoke fear. But what kind of fear?

Is it terror that makes us want to run away? Or is it deep awe and wonder that makes us want to draw near? When the Bible talks about the fear of God, that's what it means.

Deep, soul-changing awe. When you behold something so big and powerful and glorious that it takes you out of yourself in worship. And Peter is saying that if you know that the impartial judge is your heavenly father, then you have this holy fear that drives out all other fears.

You know, if you think about it, this is part of what makes Christianity so unique. A lot of religions picture God as a judge. But if God is only a judge, can we really trust him?

[18:27] If God is only a judge, maybe we'll live our lives to get on his good side long enough so that he'll leave us alone and so we can do whatever we want.

But if we don't God is only a judge, but you know, on the flip side, in more recent history, some religions only picture God as a father or maybe some sort of totally accepting benevolence, right? But if God, on the other hand, is just pure acceptance and pure affirmation, well, that's not very life-changing either, is it? It might be nice to think that God always approves of us, but surely not everything we do is approval-worthy, right?

And what does such a God have to say about real injustice and evil in the world? Does this totally accepting benevolence just sort of smile kindly upon racism and poverty and brutality and deceit and bitterness?

But in Christianity, friends, these two realities about God come together. God's perfectly just and he's perfectly loving. And through the cross, his perfect justice against sin and his perfect love for his sinful image bearers meet together.

[19 : 39] The judge of the universe, without minimizing his justice one bit, has now become our father without limiting his love in any way. So you see, in the gospel, our relationship to God has completely changed.

Before, we could relate to God only as a strict judge or only as a completely permissible father, but now we live in the awe and the holy and good fear that the perfect judge is now our perfect father. So how does this relate then to living holy lives? Well, you know, for many of us, I think that it's the fear of what people will think of us. It's the fear of how they might respond that keeps us or hinders us from living holy lives.

What will my co-workers think if they find out I'm a Christian? What will my friends think if I don't agree with them about this or that issue? And so in fear, we end up living lives of conformity rather than holy distinction.

So what is it? What is it that will drive out this human-centered fear that so often rules our lives? Ultimately, it's what Peter's talking about in verse 17.

[20 : 56] Having a bigger fear, a bigger awe of God, the perfect judge who's become our father in the gospel. Because you see, when God's verdict, when God's approval, when God's favor matters more to us than human approval or human favor, or as the Bible puts it, when we fear God more than we fear people, then we'll be empowered to live holy lives.

We won't live for a human verdict anymore because only God is the perfect judge. It's his verdict alone that matters, right? And we won't live for human favor anymore because only God is the perfect loving father.

And it's his favor alone that really matters at the end of the day. So as Peter encourages us to holy living, he tells us we have a new future and a new father.

He says our relationship to the future has changed and our relationship to God has changed. But then he goes on to say that even our relationship to our past has changed.

So let's pick back up in verse 17 of our passage. Peter says conduct yourselves with fear throughout the time of your exile, 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.

[22 : 20] He was foreknown before the foundation of the world that was made manifest in the last times for the sake of you 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.

Notice here how Peter talks about our past lives before becoming Christians. He calls it the futile ways inherited from your forefathers.

Now, Peter isn't saying that everything about their past is bad, right? There's plenty of common grace in every culture, and God delights in the diversity of his human creation, but it is also true that the fall has affected every human culture as well.

Every culture has its own idolatries, its own disordered desires, its own futile or empty ways, as Peter puts it in verse 18. And, you know, this isn't just true of kind of broad cultures, right?

It's true of families as well. You know, we inherit from our families all sorts of good things, yes, but also all sorts of futile ways, too, don't we?

[23 : 34] Just think of all that we inherit from our forefathers, as Peter puts it. From our families, we learn how to respond and treat people who are different from us. From our families, we learn how to think about gender and marriage.

From our families, we learn how to respond to negative emotions like anger or sadness or fear. From our families, we learn how to resolve conflict or not resolve conflict, as it might be, right? And sometimes these things are so ingrained that we don't even notice them. Or often, in our Christian walk, these things are so kind of habituated in us that it seems like we'll never be able to change.

And we can get to the place, willingly or unwillingly, where we say, I guess this is just who I am. I guess it will always be this way. But Peter says, remember the gospel, friends.

You've been ransomed. A price has been paid for your freedom. But not just any price, right? Peter says, God has expended the most precious thing in the world to liberate you.

[24 : 45] He's laid down his own life and shed his own blood. Christ took on your humanity and mine, and he took all the emptiness that's been handed down to you, and he died with it on the cross.

He took it to the grave once and for all. So now, whatever it might be, you know, an addiction passed down from generation to generation, and an unhealthy view of conflict and anger, a judgmental spirit towards particular races or cultures, because Christ died in our place for us, these futile ways, they no longer need to define us.

He's ransomed us. And we can walk in holiness. Of course, we may be tempted to return to them at times. You know, if you've seen anger expressed a certain way your entire life, it will take time for that to change, no doubt.

But the blood of Christ has made change a reality. As Paul will say in Galatians, he says, I've been crucified with Christ.

It's no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh, I live by faith in the Son of God who loved me and gave himself for me. I'm me, Paul says, but it's a whole new me, because I've died and risen with Christ, the one who ransomed me.

[26 : 10] And that's what Peter's saying here. He's saying we have a whole new freedom. Our relationship to our past has been fundamentally changed. It no longer defines you anymore.

He says, now you can leave those futile ways behind and walk in holiness. And then Peter does something utterly brilliant in verses 20 through 21.

To Christians who are struggling with their past, who are struggling with their identity, who are struggling with their futile ways handed down from their forefathers, Peter says, do you want to know the real story about your past?

Yes, your parents and grandparents and great grandparents all pass down to you the idolatries and sins and fears that you struggle with. But do you want to know what's even more true about your past? Do you want to know where your story really began?

Before the world was created, Peter says in verse 20, in the vast stretches of eternity when all that was was the triune God, in the infinite stretches of divine bliss there, in the perfect beauty and love of the Godhead, the Father looked upon the Son, and in the divine foreknowledge, a plan was made, a plan that has now, Peter says, at long last come to light, a plan for your sake, that through Christ the Son, you would believe in God, that through his life and glory, you would come to life and glory, to faith and hope in God.

[27 : 50] You see, friends, the history that ultimately defines you is not the story of the futile ways handed down from your forefathers. Back behind that, there lies a deeper story, the story of the eternal, sovereign love of God for you and the plan he made to make you his own and to bring you to glory.

And if that is your true history, if that's what's most true about your past, then you are free indeed. Free to live in the beautiful distinction of God's holiness, free to be holy in all your conduct, because he who called you is holy.

Let's pray together. Our Father in heaven, thank you for setting your saving love on us in Christ. And thank you, God, for the great privilege it is through your Holy Spirit to mirror your goodness in all of our lives. Lord, we know that we fall short of that so often, individually, in community. And yet, Lord, thank you that you continue to work out in us and through us your good purposes, that we might be holy as you are holy. God, think trzeba God, you, for you are hum bikers and through your reality.

[29 : 16] Father, that we may be holy, for the glory of God. To we speak through you truth and through the joy of God. From reflecting your goodness out into the world. We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.