

1 Peter 1:13-2:3
Be Children of the Father

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April 15, 2018

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Introduction: Peter the Apostle

Today is the third Sunday of the season of Easter (though looking outside it feels more like Advent or Christmas!). In our Christian calendar year, the season of Easter lasts from Resurrection Sunday all the way to Pentecost Sunday, spanning seven weeks. Just over two weeks ago, at our Maundy Thursday service, we remembered Jesus' last 24 hours before his crucifixion. Among the shadows of suffering that Jesus experienced was the experience of being denied by a close friend. During Jesus' trial, the disciple Peter denied knowing Jesus three times. After Jesus' resurrection, there is a well-known interaction between Jesus and Peter, recorded in the gospel of John, wherein Jesus asks Peter three times if he loves him. To each question, Peter replies in the affirmative, he says 'yes'. With each 'yes', Jesus gives a command: feed my lambs, tend my sheep, and feed my sheep. Jesus commissions Peter to minister, care for, and look after the people of God. Peter obeys Jesus and commits the remainder of his life to strengthening, encouraging, and caring for believers. We know this because of the two letters that are recorded for us in the Bible. These letters are, in themselves, a testimony to Peter's obedience to Jesus Christ!

Peter's purpose and life formation

While we don't know much about the recipients of Peter's letter, or about Peter's relationship with them, we do know that Peter does not want them to do the very thing he did when his identity in Christ, when his belonging to Jesus was questioned. Peter does not want them to deny or turn away from Jesus when pressured to do so. Peter does not want them to deny their identity in Christ. Peter intimately knows how hard it is to live faithfully as a follower of Jesus when the world does not know Jesus or has not welcomed him. It is remarkable, really, to think about Peter's life and faith formation – from walking on water and doubting that Jesus would save him

to denying Jesus during the climax of Jesus' life to being reinstated by Jesus as a disciple and instructed to build God's church to writing letters of encouragement and exhortation to the exiles throughout Asia. As a side note, this gives me hope for all of us: we don't know how Jesus will transform us over time.

1 Peter: suffering of believers

The context of 1 Peter is such that believers are suffering because of the cultural and societal climate around them. The decisions, lifestyle, and values of believers is in conflict with the cultural expectations of society. Basically, the way culture lives and functions is in contrast to the way believers live and function. Peter writes to the dispersed believers to encourage them to remain faithful followers of Christ in a world that doesn't know, follow, or believe in Jesus. Increasingly, this is perhaps a statement of what it's like living in Whitehorse or in Canada. Christian living is not the norm, not the standard, not the expectation anymore. In fact, not only is Christian living not the norm, but many non-believers do not know what Christian living is or means or ought to be. Thus, the theme of this letter is that Christians behave in accordance with our new reality in Jesus Christ; which means we live at odds with the culture.

Structure

Before we come to our passage this morning, I'd like to briefly make a comment about the structure of Peter's first chapter in this letter. Last week, Pastor Greg spoke about the first twelve verses in chapter 1. In that text Peter uses verbs in the indicative mode which means that Peter used verbs to state facts. In the first section, up to verse 12, Peter describes for us the reality of our salvation in Jesus Christ; our new birth, our new identity. He helps us to understand that our new birth, our new identity in Christ, makes us part of God's family. This is fact; this is theology; this is understanding and belief.

Now we get to verse 13. This verse begins with an important conjunction, he uses the word “therefore”. It means that Peter is connecting what he wrote in verses 3-12 with what he’s writing next. Peter also switches from using indicative verbs to state facts and instead uses verbs in the imperative mode to give commands in this next section.

What Peter does is link what he wrote about our new identity and new birth, about our hope in Jesus Christ with the duties, obligations, and responsibilities of our new birth and new identity in Jesus Christ. In giving us the identity as children of God (as a community), Peter calls us to live into our identity. Peter shows us how to live as children of the Father.

Most theologians and scholars divide our text this morning into two sections. The first section is 1:13-21. We notice this because Peter’s emphasis on ‘hope’ bookends this passage. An interesting fact - in the original Greek, verses 17-21 is actually one really long sentence! This first section, which we’ll explore soon, considers the command to obey as children of God. The second section, 1:22-2:3 looks at the consequence of our obedience.

Command to obey

First, the command to obey is found in verse 16. Peter cites a well-known passage of Christian ethical teaching from Leviticus: “you shall be holy, for I am holy”; or “be holy, because I am holy”. Now when we hear this command, it is easy to conclude it is impossible to obey, it is an impossible expectation because I can never be perfect. But perhaps my understanding of what holiness is wrong; maybe being holy isn’t about being perfect.

So let's first consider what holiness means. Two years ago, I preached about holiness from the book of Leviticus but let me remind you about its definition because it's easy to forget what this word means since it's not part of our regular vocabulary, and certainly not part of cultural language. Many people, after all, assume holiness is about moral or ethical purity. When defined in that way, holiness becomes a legalistic set of lists or rules to follow; usually a list of what is not allowed: don't do that, you can't do this, that's not allowed either.

Both the Hebrew word in the Old Testament and the Greek word in the New Testament that is translated as 'holy' means 'set apart'. God is holy, not because he is more moral or superior than us, but because he is completely and fully set apart from all his creation. God is unique and distinct and different – God is holy – in every way. Therefore, God's command to be holy isn't first about moral behaviour, although holiness includes our moral and ethical behaviour. To be holy is first about living a life that is set apart, that is unique and different and distinct.

Leviticus command

How are we to be holy – how are we to be set apart? Is holiness about coming to church to worship God – that's being set apart from the culture. Is holiness about how we conduct ourselves at work by speaking truthfully and honestly – which is different than how others speak. Is holiness about how we treat our family members and those closest to us? Is holiness about my actions?

To get a fuller understanding, we ought to look in the book of Leviticus where it was first written "be holy because I am holy". We can turn to Leviticus 11:44 which says *For I am the Lord your God; sanctify yourselves therefore, and be holy, for I am holy.* Then eight chapters later, in

Leviticus 19:2, we see the same *Speak to all the congregation of the people of Israel and say to them, you shall be holy for I the Lord your God am holy*. This text in Leviticus is bookended by God's command and declaration – a command to be holy and a declaration that God is holy. Everything that comes in between those verses, we find God prescribing a way that his people are to live and worship him. The manner of living and worship will set Israel apart from the nations that surround them. The instructions we read in Leviticus aren't limited to directions for worship services only. Rather the commands that we read in those eight chapters of Leviticus cover all aspects of life: from what to eat to health and sickness to how to treat one's parents. It is clear that God doesn't intend for us to divide our lives in terms of what is holy and what is not holy. Holiness is about all aspects of our life.

So does holiness look exactly the same throughout all of history, in different times and places? No; it is expressed in ways that are appropriate to history, to geography, to time and place. For example, we don't read about the early church following the Leviticus code of holiness. Cultures change, adapt, evolve. If holiness is about being set apart, distinct, unique, then holiness will not look exactly the same throughout all of history. It certainly doesn't mean that there is contradiction in how we are holy, but there will be changes because culture and society changes. We will read later on in Peter's letter, for example, his instructions on holy living between masters and slaves. Well, that type of relationship doesn't exist now but the principle of holiness, of being set apart, certainly does apply.

The commands in Leviticus that God gave to his people are for their wellbeing and their benefit. But the greater purpose is so that God's people will live a life that is set apart, that is unique and

distinct from the other nations. God's people are to live a life that is set apart for the purpose of demonstrating God to the world. God's character was revealed through the covenant God made with Israel. More importantly, God's character was revealed most thoroughly through Jesus Christ. In both these covenants, the covenant of the Old Testament and the covenant of the New Testament, the goal is still the same: to create a people who conform to and reflect God's character to the world. This is what being holy means: being set apart from the world so the world can come to know and see God through His people – through the believers.

Let me be clear that when God commands us to be holy because he is holy, he does not expect that we will reach the standard of who he is, for that would mean we would be divine. This is impossible for us. Nevertheless, Peter tells us in verse 17 that we, as children of God, call him Father, so there ought to be a family resemblance: like Father, like son; or like Father, like daughter. If God – if our Father – is set apart, then we as his children will also live lives that are set apart, unique and distinct from the world. And being set apart means being set apart in all areas of our life.

I remember when I moved to Uganda over ten years ago to live there for one year. I lived in a rural, remote village and was the only ex-pat there. I found myself in a completely foreign culture, with different customs, different ways of eating, different rituals, different ways of being in relationship with others, different languages, different ways of organizing a home, and ultimately a very different worldview – a different way of looking at and interpreting the world. I was a foreigner. No matter how much I tried to adapt and learn, I knew it would be impossible in those short 12 months to become Ugandan. It's intriguing how when I went overseas, I wanted to

‘become Ugandan’ and forfeit my Canadian identity; I wonder if this is the same for people who come to Canada. I was set apart – not just because of the colour of my skin but because of my accent, my movement (apparently I kept a very fast walking pace), the awkward way I tried to eat food with my hands, my inability to carry pots off the hot charcoal stove without any mitts (this singular deficit of mine meant I was not marriageable material for any Ugandan man!).

Needless to say, every day I was keenly aware that I was a stranger in a strange land despite my best attempts to integrate. I was set apart, unique, distinct and it wasn’t always comfortable or pleasurable for me.

Peter tries to explain that living as a child of God will feel a lot like what I felt like in Uganda because living here feels like being a stranger. People who are around us – our colleagues, our friends, our family should notice that there is something different about the way we live.

Now, it may seem logical and reasonable that the way to live a holy life – the way to live a life set apart, unique, distinct, a stranger in a strange land – is to focus on changing our behaviour, our actions, our doing. When we look closely at Peter’s letter, we don’t see him encouraging us to focus on a change of behaviour though. Like Peter, we know that simply focusing on changing our behaviour usually doesn’t work.

For example, many people nowadays want to limit or reduce their use of smartphones or other technology. Studies have come out about the damaging impact of overuse of smartphones for one’s complete health. So people try to change their behaviour: perhaps they’ll prohibit their phone in their bedroom so that at 2am they won’t go to look at it; maybe they’ll keep it in a

drawer at work to avoid looking at it. Inevitably, these behaviour changes won't work. In days or weeks or months, people are back to their screens. Changing our behaviour rarely works.

So if focusing on changing my behaviour isn't the way towards being holy, then what do we do to be holy, how do we become holy? Peter outlines in this passage what we ought to focus on; how we become holy.

God makes us holy

First of all, the starting place for our holiness is God. We can't make ourselves holy; it is God who makes us holy because we are his children. God is holy and he makes us holy by virtue of our identity in him.

Nevertheless, there are steps we also take towards holiness. Peter outlines them in the passage.

Discipline mind

One way we become holy is by disciplining our minds. We hear this instruction from Peter in verse 13. Peter commands us to set our hope fully on the grace that will be brought to us at the second coming of Jesus. The way we make our living hope real is to look ahead to our inheritance in Jesus instead of looking around at our circumstances. The command has more to do with our mind than with our actions. We become holy by changing how we think.

In order to discipline our mind we must first prepare our minds for action. We are to gird up our loins for action which means to remove any barriers that might prevent us from focusing our minds on the things of God. Secondly, to discipline our mind we must be sober-minded. This means that we are to keep control of our mind, to not become overwhelmed or absorbed by the way the world thinks.

There are two ways that we discipline our mind according to this passage: First, we turn away from the thinking of the world. Second, we turn to God's way of thinking about the world, we turn to thinking of God's world.

Throughout the rest of the passage Peter shows us how and what to think of God's world. First, Peter reminds us what God has done so that we can be called his children. In verses 17-21, we are reminded that we were ransomed at a great price. From the beginning of time, it was always God's plan to rescue, to restore, to redeem all creation through his Son Jesus Christ; not through things that can perish like silver or gold. In verse 23, Peter reminds us of our new birth, something which Pastor Greg spoke about last week from 1 Peter 1:3. In Jesus, we are born again, we are given a new life and God has called us to live in his world while citizens of his kingdom. It is our new birth – our new identity – that provides the possibility of being able to be holy in all our conduct. Lastly, God's word sustains us, which we read about in verse 23.

When my mind focuses on all that God has done for me in choosing me to be his child and making me part of his family, part of his kingdom; then over time my conduct will naturally end up being consistent with the principles of God's kingdom. To be holy is not a matter of changing our behaviour; it is a matter of changing our minds by focusing on who God is, by focusing on what Jesus has done for us, and by focusing on his word. When our changed behaviour occurs as a result of disciplining my mind rather than trying to change my behaviour, I am much more likely to be able to continue to live a life of holiness. Holiness begins with God's initiating work in us, through our new identity and new birth in Jesus. Holiness grows as we focus on our disciplining our minds and thoughts, not our actions.

Consequence of Obedience

So if the command to obey is to be holy, just as God is holy, then it should be no surprise that the consequence or result of our obedience is love. God is love and this was demonstrated most clearly by sending his Son Jesus to bring salvation, to inaugurate God's Kingdom on earth, to restore and redeem all of creation. Our new birth and identity in Jesus Christ leads to a life of holiness which leads to love towards another. The result of our obedience is outlined in 1 Peter 1:22-2:3. The result ultimately is love for our brothers and sisters.

This section begins Peter's teaching on how the community of believers (ie the church), and not society at large, is to be the Christian's primary social context, for it is our shared faith in Christ that brings us together into eternal fellowship with one another.

Conclusion/summary

Why is all of this so important? Because, as Pastor Greg reminded us, being born again, receiving a new birth and a new identity in Jesus Christ is also about becoming part of God's great family. Because God is holy, we are made holy. God wants us to be involved in a new kind of world order he is bringing into being. The purpose of our being holy is not so we can feel that we're better than others, no, it's to display God to the world.

Nowhere in Peter's letter does he advocate that Christians withdraw from culture and society because of the hostility and persecution and suffering that Christians face in light of their holiness. Nowhere in Peter's letter does he teach that holiness is practiced in isolation from the community and world. Rather, Peter teaches that it is our collective holy living in the world which demonstrates God's character to the world.

We are the children of God and as his children, we are holy, set apart. God makes us holy and we develop holiness through disciplining our minds. We are holy so we can show the world who God is and participate in making his Kingdom a reality on earth as it is in heaven.