

## **Pursue Holiness**

1 Peter 1:14-16 (06/26/16)

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*1 Peter 1:14-16, 14 As obedient children, do not be conformed to the former lusts which were yours in your ignorance, 15 but like the Holy One who called you, be holy yourselves also in all your behavior; 16 because it is written, "YOU SHALL BE HOLY, FOR I AM HOLY."*

Do you agree with this statement: "Whatever is right for your life or works best for you is the only truth you can know?" Three-quarters of Millennials, those born between 1980 and 2000, agree to some degree with that statement. Just a month ago on May 25, 2016, the Barna Group, an evangelical Christian polling firm, came out with an article entitled, "The End of Absolutes: America's New Moral Code." Here's a paragraph from that article.

*Christian morality is being ushered out of American social structures and off the cultural main stage, leaving a vacuum in its place—and the broader culture is attempting to fill the void.... Many American adults admit they are uncertain about how to determine right from wrong. So what do Americans believe? Is truth relative or absolute? And do Christians see truth and morality in radically different ways from the broader public, or are they equally influenced by the growing tide of secularism and religious skepticism?*

We all know we're in a heap of trouble in our day. We are living through a moral revolution. But we're no different than Peter's world where sensuality, lusts, drunkenness, carousing, drinking parties and abominable idolatries were the norm. And not only that, but the people viewed followers of Christ as weird and maligned them for not agreeing with their godless practices – 1 Peter 4:3-4. Sounds familiar, doesn't it? So what does God through Peter say to Christians in such a culture? "Don't conform. You are called to live a life totally different than the culture around you."

God has reached into your godless world and given you new life through the resurrection of Christ. Even through all your trials, you are secure in Christ and headed for a glorious future. Instead of moaning and groaning like Eeyore, you are rejoicing in the Lord! Last week Peter turned the corner onto, "Okay, we know we have a secure, glorious future, but how should we live here and now until we get there?" God says in verse 13, "Keep an active mind, a level head, and a hope-filled heart all the way to when Christ returns." Now Peter is going to set the standard for all our behavior in this world. And it can be wrapped up in one word: holiness. Pursue holiness. That's first. God's holiness is the one unchanging standard of right and wrong, good and evil, truth and error. You and I are called to pursue holiness while living on earth. Hebrews 12:14 says, "Pursue holiness, without which no one will see the Lord." Let's break Peter's call to holiness into three parts.

**Pursuing holiness means you need a strong conviction and understanding of God's absolute standard of holiness – v. 16, "You shall be holy, for I am holy."**

Nothing is more important than how you think about God. When thinking about God, recognize that His crowning, supreme attribute is holiness. Everything about God is permeated and conditioned with holiness. "He is light and in Him is no darkness at all." (1 Jn 1:5) Holiness is God's glory and beauty. Psalm 29:2 says, "Worship the Lord in the beauty of holiness." When the glory of the Lord covers the earth, His holiness will cover the earth. He is the "Holy One of Israel." (Is 47:4)

*Isaiah 57:15, For thus says the high and exalted One Who lives forever, whose name is Holy, "I dwell on a high and holy place, And also with the contrite and lowly of spirit In order to revive the spirit of the lowly And to revive the heart of the contrite.*

*Ezekiel 39:7, "My holy name I will make known in the midst of My people Israel; and I will not let My holy name be profaned anymore. And the nations will know that I am the LORD, the Holy One in Israel.*

Everything about God is holy. God's love is holy, His power is holy, His justice is holy, His grace is holy. Stephen Charnock wrote, "Though we conceive of God as infinite in majesty and essence, eternal in duration, mighty in power and wise and inimitable in His counsels, merciful in his proceedings with men, and whatever other perfections dignify so sovereign a being, yet if we conceive of God as destitute of this excellent perfection and imagine him possessed of the least contagion of evil, we make him but an infinite monster!" We need strong convictions of God's holiness.

God's heaven is a heaven of holiness. There isn't a smidgen of sin, evil, or darkness there. Many think heaven will be a big party with their friends. Islam teaches the men that heaven will be an eternal brothel; what a horrible degradation of women. The Bible teaches heaven is God's dwelling place, and it is absolutely holy and pure. The angels continually repeat their triple call, "Holy, holy, holy!" People whose hearts God has changed and made partakers of His nature will absolutely love the holiness of heaven.

But people whose hearts God hasn't changed and who love sin will absolutely hate heaven. J. C. Ryle in his chapter on holiness wrote, "When an eagle is happy in an iron cage, when a sheep is happy in the water, when an owl is happy in the blaze of noontday sun, when a fish is happy on the dry land—then, and not till then, will I admit that the unsanctified man would be happy in heaven."

Holiness means separation. God is separate from all sin and hates and loathes all sin. He has zero tolerance for sin of any kind. He allows no sin to go unpunished. He shows us in the Bible what He thinks of sin. He punished it in Noah's day with a flood (Gen. 6-8). He punished it in sending fire and brimstone on Sodom and Gomorrah (Gen. 19). He will punish sin forever in the lake of fire (Matt. 25:41). The greatest display of God's holiness and hatred of sin was at the cross. God's holiness demanded punishment for sin, even if it meant the horror of crushing His own Son under His wrath against sin. No sin goes unpunished under God's holiness. His wrath burns against all sin. You either find refuge in the cross of Christ from God's holy wrath, or you will face His wrath at the Great White Throne Judgment. You can't have both a holy God and sin left unpunished anywhere in His universe. That's why everything is going to be burned up and purified in the future (2 Pet 3:10).

God saved you to make you first and foremost holy, set apart. He chose you in Christ to be holy and blameless – Ephesians 1:4. John 17:17 says, "Sanctify or make them holy through your truth. Your Word is truth." The words holy and sanctify and saint are all the same family of words – *hagios*. They all mean "set apart." When you came to Christ, you were positionally sanctified, set apart from sin into Christ. That's why 1 Corinthians 1:2 describes believers like this, "To the church of God which is at Corinth, to those who have been **sanctified in Christ Jesus, saints by calling.**" When you trusted in Christ as your savior from sin, you were set apart in Christ Jesus. Harry Ironside tells about riding in a train with some nuns who were talking about Catholic saints. When they asked Harry his name, he replied, "I'm Saint Harry." They were probably surprised by Ironside's introduction, but he was right. All believers in Christ are sanctified because they are in Him and therefore called saints.

In addition to positional sanctification, the Bible also talks about practical sanctification or progressive sanctification, which basically means progressively becoming more holy. What does that mean? Some people in the early church wanted to become more holy, so they took off for the deserts and caves thinking that if by themselves without outside influence, they could get closer to God. Some ended on high pillars. Symeon Stylites chained himself in a cave but still didn't feel holy enough, so he climbed increasingly higher pillars to a height of 60 feet. He spent day and night for 36 long years on a platform at the top of these pillars exposed to the scorching sun, drenching rain, crackling frost, and howling storms, all the while groaning under the load of sin with no relief by the grace of God in Christ. One author reports that in some cases two or more pillar saints of differing theological viewpoints could find themselves within calling distance of each other and so would argue with one another from their columns (Schaff/Wikipedia).

Thankfully, this has nothing to do with God's way of pursuing holiness or progressive sanctification. Peter gives us God's grand principle of progressive sanctification, of putting off sin and putting on holiness, of growing and changing to please God and become more like His Son.

**Pursuing holiness means a radical change from your old way of living** – v. 14, *As obedient children, do not be conformed to the former lusts which were yours in your ignorance.*

“Obedient children” refers to those who are part of God's family. John 1:12, “But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, even to those who believe in His name.” We aren't earning our way into God's family – we were born into it. When God makes you a recipient of His nature; He gives you a new heart of obedience. Unbelievers do not pursue holiness. They have no nature to do it, no power to do it, and no desire to do it. Remember before you came to Christ? Did you care about pleasing God? No, you were bent toward your own selfish desires.

Every child of God has a heart of obedience, a heart pointed in the direction of obeying God's will. You can't do this to yourself. God puts His Holy Spirit in you and leads you to obey your heavenly Father. That's why pursuing holiness for a believer is not legalism or a dreaded thing. Pursuing holiness is motivated by your relationship with your loving heavenly Father. You actually find delight in God's holiness. You desire to please Him and pursue holiness in gratitude for all He's done for you. Many young believers have picked up Ryle's chapter Holiness or Charnock's The Holiness of God in his book on the attributes. Even songs about God's holiness bring a strange new joy and delight. God is your loving heavenly Father, and you are His obedient child!

Peter highlights three major problems in our old way of living.

First, you were ignorant. You didn't know God! You didn't know how wicked sin was, how it ruins and destroys. You knew it was wrong, but thought it was fun. It felt edgy, like you were getting away with something. You threw curse words out there to sound big. You never thought that sinning was slavery. You thought you were free to do whatever you wanted. You didn't know how holy God was, that He loathes and will judge every sin, that your sin required the horror of Calvary, wrath from God's holiness poured out on Jesus! You were ignorant. You may have been religious, morally self-righteous, thinking you were fine with your good outweighing your bad, but you were ignorant. Ephesians 4:17 says we all “walked in the futility of our minds.”

Second, you lived by your own desires, your own feelings, your lusts, your heart's wants and wishes. You let your thoughts run unleashed. You fed your sensual side, perhaps by pornography, or by hooking up with someone casually. You said whatever came to mind, gossiping, slandering, filthy words came from your mouth. If others pleased you, you were happy; if others got in your way, nasty words and thoughts ruled you. Here's a good description of our former way of living in Titus 3:3, “For we also once were foolish ourselves, disobedient, deceived, enslaved to various lusts and pleasures, spending our lives in malice and envy, hateful, hating one another.”

Third, God says you must stop following this old pattern of living. “Conformed” has the idea of a pattern or mold. What was molding your life before Christ? You were controlled by your lusts and your self-pleasing desires. “I feel this way, so I'll live this way. If I feel this way, it must be right.” You may have even brought God into it, “God made me this way so it must be okay.” But feeling like committing adultery or looking at pornography or stealing that money or as a young man you feel feminine and want to become a girl, does not make it right. Those feelings only reveal you are allowing sin to control you. Your desires and natural inclinations do not set the standard for your life; God's Word must set the standard for the child of God. Pursuing holiness means you're going to have to break that mold, break out of that pattern that held you in slavery. You now belong to your loving Father so He will give you the direction and power to do it, but your previous pattern with all your old habits of living for your personal, self-pleasing desires has to stop. And your heart's desire to stop the old pattern is a sure indication you are a child of God.

So here's what God is saying. You used to set the standard by following your own lusts, but no more. Romans 6:11 says in Christ you died to sin and are alive to God. You are no longer a slave to your former pattern of living. The gospel, the truth of Christ has set you free to pursue holiness. You have this new power, new nature, new motivation, and new standard to pursue – the holiness of God!

**Pursuing holiness means bringing all of your life under the new standard of God's holiness** –vv. 15-16, *but like the Holy One who called you, be holy yourselves also in all your behavior; because it is written, "You shall be holy, for I am holy."*

Who called you to salvation? The Holy One! Remember, God's crowning attribute above all else is His holiness! God called you with a holy calling, a calling to holiness. Here's your motivation to pursue holiness – because your God is holy. He sets the standard of right and wrong, good and evil, truth and error. Holiness is everything God is – good, true, right, pure, loving, merciful, just.

Notice where you are to practice His holiness? "In all your behavior." That word behavior is a favorite of Peter's. He uses it six times. It focuses on what you actually do on a day to day basis, in all your going here and there. Pursue holiness everywhere, all the time, in every situation, regardless of who's around. Whether you are in your home, in the car, at the store, at work, at school, at church – everywhere in all your behavior. Don't be a Christian chameleon, changing your behavior depending on the surroundings. A true believer doesn't try to be holy on Sunday mornings and then act like the devil all week long. You dare not compartmentalize your pursuit of holiness. Zechariah 14:20-21 tells us, "even the bells on the bridles of the horses and the pots and pans had 'holy to the Lord' inscribed on them." Maybe it would be beneficial to attach visible labels to your TV, laptop, and all your devices with these words, "Holy to the Lord."

So what does holiness look like in practice? Beware; it certainly isn't a "holier-than-thou" attitude or smug self-righteousness. When we truly grasp God's standard of holiness, how high it is and how far short we come of it, there is certainly no room for pride or comparing ourselves. God's holiness does two things to us – makes us desperate for Christ, and motivates us to keep growing and changing. 1 Thessalonians 4:1-8 talks about God calling us to pursue holiness.

- Vs. 1, Your goal is to please God.
- Vs. 2, There are two ways to live, fleshly desires or in submission to God's authority.
- Vs. 3, God's will is crystal clear – sexual purity, which means the one legitimate sexual thought and behavior is in marriage, between a man and a woman.
- Vs. 4, Holiness means self-control over your passions.
- Vs. 5, You know God and have His Spirit within to live God's way.
- Vs. 6, Holiness means refusing to defraud or take what isn't yours.
- Vs. 7, God Himself called you to holiness.
- Vs. 8, Moral holiness or purity is not optional.

#### SO WHAT?

Our culture may have lost all bearings and standards of right and wrong, but God's people haven't because God's holiness will never change! How do you put this into practice? By praying and asking God to show you areas in your life that are not pleasing Him – your attitude, your temper, your words, your habits. Psalm 139:23-24, "Search me, O God, and know my thoughts and see if there is any evil way in me." Search and destroy those sin gangsters in your heart before they do damage. The moment you smell something rotten in there, get rid of it. Keep your heart filled with His Word – let it dwell in you richly and apply His will and His holy standard to your life! Memorize and personalize Colossians 3, a chapter which gives you a good snapshot of God's plan for your holiness. Here's a great verse to write down and personalize. Romans 6:11, "Even so, Ernie, consider yourself to be dead to sin, but alive to God in Christ Jesus."