

HOLIER THAN THOU?

1Peter 1:13-16

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DeLong Sermon Series

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Are there any words that drive you crazy; that make you cringe? I'm not talking about profanity, or derogatory words. I'm just talking about normal, everyday words that people use. There are a few words in the English language that I just can't stand the sound of! I don't know what it is about them. One of them is the word "crisp." Don't ask me why, but that word drives me nuts! When I hear it, I picture dried banana chips (which are disgusting—no offense to all you dried banana chip lovers!) I also can't stand the word "moist." It just sounds gross! It reminds me of mildewed gym socks! I don't know, maybe that makes me weird. If that doesn't, there is whole list of other things that make me weird (just ask my wife)!

Anyway, I don't know why, but some words just bother me. When I was a teenager, there was another word that didn't sit right with me: the word "holy." I didn't use it in sentences; it wasn't a focus of my spiritual devotion. I avoided it at all costs. Now, many of you are now wondering why I became a Nazarene whose primary core values contain, of all words, "holiness." It's because I discovered one day that I didn't hate the word "holiness," but instead hated the image and definition of "holiness" that I had developed over time. I thought of holiness as a checklist of dos and don'ts (mostly don'ts). When I heard or spoke the word, I could only imagine a bunch of joyless, arrogant, law-abiding fun-killers. So I steered clear of the word. The problem was, I noticed that while I may have avoided the word, Scripture did not. The word "holy" appears over 150 times in the New Testament alone! According to Scripture, that's a

pretty important word, and it needed to be important to me. I realized that I needed a better grasp of the meaning of being *holy*.

I want to share some of what I learned this morning. We're going to take a look at what the apostle Peter wrote about holiness. We're going to look at 1 Peter chapter 1, verse 13 through 16. As you're turning to 1 Peter let's set this up a little here. Peter is writing to the Christians who have been chased out of Jerusalem and scattered all over Asia. No longer in close proximity to any kind of "core" of Christianity, these scattered Christians are feeling the weight of persecution, loneliness, and tribulation. Peter gives them encouragement as to how they are to respond to this suffering. He writes, starting in verse 13:

Therefore, prepare your minds for action; be self-controlled; set your hope fully on the grace to be given you when Jesus Christ is revealed. As obedient children, do not conform to the evil desires you had when you lived in ignorance. But just as he who called you is holy, so be holy in all you do; for it is written: "Be holy, because I am holy."

So here is what the people reading Peter's letter hear in verses 15 and 16: God has called us, He wants us to be holy, and we need to be holy *because* He is holy. Sounds simple enough right? There's a question still lingering though. What does it look like to be holy? How do we get there? Because, at first glance, this passage is kind of like telling me to go to Salem. Well, that's great, but I have a problem: I don't know how to get there. Whenever you are traveling, a great tool to have is a good GPS system. I see people using these things all the time. This way you know where to go

and how to get there. When it comes to being holy, Scripture is our GPS. Now, the first thing you do with your GPS when you want to know how to get somewhere is define your destination. So, I want to take a look at that first step of defining our destination: what *is* holiness?

The key to answering that question lies in understanding that it's the wrong question. We need to understand that it's not about *what* holiness is, but rather *who*. God has called us to be holy as He is holy. When Peter wrote this he was quoting Leviticus 19 in which God tells the people of Israel "Be holy because I am holy." The Hebrew word for "holy" used in here Leviticus is *qodesh*. *Qodesh* has a few meanings, but the one most commonly used as it relates to God is *separate*. God is completely unique; there is no one like Him in the entire universe. God is completely other-worldly. God is holy.

This definition of holiness is simple and profound all at the same time. God is the definition of holiness. Holiness isn't just one of many attributes of God; it is the sum of all his attributes (Greathouse, 19). So, when God is calling us to be holy, He is calling us to take on all of his attributes; His qualities. He is calling us to walk like Him, talk like Him, and look like Him; to rid ourselves of our old attributes and be made more and more into His image.

That's why Peter writes in Verse 14, "As obedient children, do not conform to the evil desires you had when you lived in ignorance." In order to be holy, we can't keep giving ourselves over to the self-centered desires we had before we knew Christ. We

are going to have to change. We are going to have to be different. It reminds me a lot of what Paul writes in Romans 12:1.

“Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God—this is your spiritual act of worship. Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind.”

In order to reach holiness—in order to be holy as God is holy—we are going to have to quit being *conformed* and start being *transformed*; to have our entire being completely changed. Transformation is the road to our destination of holiness.

Now, we need to be careful not to take the wrong road. See, I'm a guy who loves to experiment with shortcuts when I am driving. I am always interested to see if I can't get to my destination by a faster route. I like to modify what the GPS is telling me. Often times, it's because I think I'm smarter than the GPS, but that's not always the case. Sometimes I end up in a dead end, or end up getting there much later than I had hoped. Isn't that the case with our pursuit of holiness sometimes? We seek true transformation, but sometimes we take shortcuts, and that leads to a condition that John Ortberg writes about. It's called *Pseudo-transformation*.

When we experience *true* transformation, our whole being is completely changed. It starts on the inside and works its way out. It's a daily process. More often than not, it's a slow process, but it produces a significant change in us. We see this in our actions, and our attitudes. This inward transformation causes us to look and act different. But if we do not become changed from the inside-out, we might be tempted to search for *external* ways to satisfy our need to feel that we're different from those

outside the faith. We put fish symbols on our cars. We put on Christian music and T-shirts. I remember working at a camp one summer when a counselor wore a shirt that said "They shall know we are Christians by our T-shirts." But in reality, our lives aren't much different than they were before we knew Christ. This is *pseudo-transformation*. If we can't be transformed, we will at least try to *look* transformed (Ortberg, 30-31). You know what Pseudo-transformation is? Pseudo-transformation is imitation holiness.

Several months ago, my wife read an article about milk that grossed her out, so we got rid of all milk products in the house. We replaced them with soy. The soy milk was fine, but we got this soy sour-cream-substitute. It looked like sour cream, but it was horrible! When we are pseudo-transformed, we are like imitation soy-sour cream. We might look like the real thing, but we aren't anywhere near the real thing, and if you get close enough, it becomes pretty obvious.

The Pharisees were pseudo-transformed. They had knowledge. They had memorized the law to the letter. They were sacred. They were set apart from anything or anyone that might make them unclean. They succeeded in being separated from people, but failed to move any closer to God. They looked different from the pagans, but next to God there was no family resemblance. If you read Matthew 23, you will read about the seven woes. These are the "woe-to-you" statements that Jesus made about the Pharisees. He called them white-washed tombs. He said they were like cups that were clean on the outside, but dirty on the inside. He accused them of placing heavy burdens that on the shoulders of men; burdens of manmade, ritualistic, imitation-holiness. The Pharisees were the epitome of *pseudo-transformation*.

So if God is the definition of true holiness, and the Pharisees are the definition of pseudo-holiness, then the question is how do we experience true, complete holiness, and avoid *pseudo-transformation*? What's the right road to true transformation and holiness? Well, for one thing, the road begins by coming to grips with the truth that holiness is God's doing; not ours.

Scripture is full of imagery about things being transformed. In those images, however, you won't find something that was transformed all on its own. Isaiah 64 paints a picture of us as clay in the potter's hand. Have you ever seen how pottery works? A potter takes a lump of clay, spins it on a wheel, uses his hands and his tools to form it and shape it so that it is *transformed* from a heap into a beautiful vessel.

Malachi 3 has an illustration of silversmiths and goldsmiths who refine metals. A refiner refines precious metals by taking raw material, heating it up, scooping aside impurities. The refiner knows that the metal is pure when he can clearly see his face in the reflection.

Do you know what is so vital about those images of potters and refiners? Have you ever seen a lump of clay spontaneously become a priceless vase? Have you ever seen a chunk of silver or gold ore strain hard and suddenly become a pure 24kt ring? Those materials cannot, by their own strength of will, become masterpieces. They are only transformed at the hands of a skilled craftsman. We are to be holy as God is holy, but apart from Him, *we can't* become holy. No matter how hard you strain, you will not become holy by your efforts alone. This is the burden that we can't carry. Being holy as He is holy is impossible without His work in our lives.

You may be wondering then, what's the point of fasting, praying, and reading the Word if God does all the work? Richard Foster writes that, by themselves, the Spiritual Disciplines, like fasting and praying, do nothing. What they *do* is bring us to the place where something can be done. These Spiritual Disciplines remove distractions, bring us closer to God, and allow the Holy Spirit to make us look like Him. This is their purpose, and this is why they are so important. Spiritual disciplines like fasting, prayer, study, meditation, silence, solitude, and worship provide moments in which God can do something great in our lives. They aren't some sort of check-box list of things we need to do in order to look and feel more holy. They provide the fire that God uses to refine us. They provide opportunities for God to make us holy. When we understand the Disciplines in this light, we no longer see them as heavy burdens. In Matthew 11:28-31, Jesus says, *"Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light."*

Jesus communicated to us the difference between the Pharisees' brand of holiness and His. The Pharisees placed the burden of ritual and lifeless rules on to people. Jesus offers us a much lighter burden by taking the weight on to His own shoulders. But, lest we think that holiness is some sort of passive issue where we just place ourselves in spiritual neutral, we need to understand that there's a bit of a catch to this.

C. S. Lewis says that the Christian way is easier and harder at the same time (Lewis, 8). Here is what this means: When we come to Christ, He takes the burden of

sin and the battle between good and evil within us, and gives us *His* yoke; an easy yoke. That's the easy part. Now for the hard part: in order to take on the easy yoke of Christ, we have to give up our yoke of control. We have to surrender. We have to die to our "self". That's hard, because "self" is a powerful force.

Dying to self is difficult. Giving up our time, energy, and resources, and practicing spiritual disciplines is difficult. But it's not nearly as difficult as straining to make ourselves into the image of God while retaining our old self-image at the same time. The spiritual disciplines we have talked about teach us to give up *control* of our lives and surrender to the transforming power of God **through** the Spirit of God. If we come to Him daily, offering our bodies, minds, and hearts as living sacrifices—if we surrender all that we are for His purposes—He is faithful to transform us; to make us holy. Once we experience true transformation, we are ready to go back into the world. That's right—back into the world!

Another difference between Jesus and the Pharisees is that the Pharisees viewed holiness as staying as far away from "unclean" people as possible. Jesus was exactly the opposite. Jesus walked, talked, and shared meals with the worst of sinners; yet he was still separate. That's because *His* separation from the world was not one of distance, but one of uniqueness in character. Peter understood this concept. Earlier in his letter, he had already given this exhortation. In 1 Peter 2:12, Peter wrote to the Christians scattered throughout the pagan world and said, "Live such good lives **among the pagans** that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day He visits us." When we are holy—transformed—we are sent *back into* the world not as citizens, but as foreigners. When Holly and I visited

her friend in Japan, we were foreigners. We sat with them, shared the same meals, shared the same house; but we looked different. For one thing, I was, on average, about 6 inches taller than everyone.

As citizens of the kingdom of God, we are foreigners here. We live here, we share time, conversation, and space with the people of this world, but we look different. We are the image bearers of Christ. This is so important because *this is how God chooses to reveal himself to the world*. So, holiness—true, transforming holiness—has a profound purpose.

But in order to see that purpose fulfilled in our lives there are two things we have to do. First, we have to stop trying to take holiness shortcuts; looking holy on the outside only. We have to stop worrying about keeping up with the spiritual Jones'. We have to stop trying so hard to look holy. Instead, let's use the disciplines to surrender every moment of our lives to Him, and allow His Spirit to produce real holiness in us.

Finally, let's remember that God didn't call us to be holy simply for the sake of looking different. When we are holy, as He is holy, people see the face of God when they look at us. If we remember those two things, then our pursuit of holiness can make a real difference in the world.

CONCLUSION

As a teenager, I was wrong about holiness. I believed that it was nothing more than a moral checklist that only resulted in an angry, intolerable Christian. I thought holiness was unattainable because it was too hard to live up to such a standard. It

made me tired and discouraged. I was in a rut. But, holiness isn't what I thought it was; it's deeper.

Holiness is found *in God alone*. It is available *through Christ alone*, and it is attainable *through the work of Holy Spirit **alone***. We can be holy "as He is holy." We can show the world what God looks like. But in order to do that, we have to be truly transformed into His image.

Are you tired of imitation holiness? Are you ready to experience true transformation? It's not cheap. It's expensive. It will cost us our very lives. We will have to die to "self." But whatever we lose in death to self, we gain infinitely more in our new life, and new purpose *in Christ*. Are you ready to make a difference?

Answer the call. Be disciplined. Be surrendered. Be transformed. Be holy as He is holy. Let's pray.

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