

This Exiled Life – part 1

Be a Holy People

1 Peter 1:14-16

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“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.” (1 Peter 1:14–16, ESV)

When I say the word “holy” or “holiness” what do you think about, or what goes through your mind? Is it a positive word for you, something that makes your heart lean into the subject? Or does something else happen?

When you hear the word “holy,” is it primarily a theological concept, as in knowing that God is holy? If you grew up in church, you might immediately think of the hymn “Holy, Holy, Holy” or maybe Isaiah’s vision of God in Isaiah 6. Or maybe you think of the word “holy” as an adjective to describe spiritual people or things – like “Holy Father” or “The Holy Bible.”

Let me press this question a bit deeper and at a more personal level. What happens inside of you when you hear “be holy” as a command from the Bible? Many of us came out of church traditions where that particular statement was immediately followed by a list of things that Christians were not allowed to do. The command “to be holy” was usually connected to the idea of separation from the world and in some cases developing alternative communities in order to protect ourselves from the compromising effects of a sinful world.

Some of you are in what I have called “the church recovery program,” which means that you grew up in a church tradition that focused more on saying “No” than on saying “Yes.” As a result, your experience with Christianity was a rule-oriented, fear-based, and behavior-focused culture. Therefore, any talk about “holiness” has a lot of baggage because you probably saw how ineffective, frustrating, or even dangerous that culture was.

Others of you are fairly new to Christianity, and I would guess that holiness is a word that feels “old school” and very distant to you. Perhaps it would be something you’d hear your grandmother talk about. Or maybe it is a word that you think describes really spiritual people – super Christians.

Regardless of where we are all coming from, I would guess that how we think and talk about holiness is pretty loaded. “Holy” is a really important word in the Bible, and yet I think it is safe to say that talking about holiness is not a very popular topic. At least in the circles that I run, there is much more talk about cultural engagement and contextualization than there is about holiness, especially personal holiness.

In fact, it seems to me that there is almost a fear about talking about holiness because of a fear (probably understandable) about driving off a cliff into militant fundamentalism. While I totally get that and feel that, our text today pushes us to perhaps be a bit more balanced.

This Exiled Life = a Holy Life

1 Peter is a book written to exiles, but their situation has not been created because of changing locations. They are not physical exiles. Instead, they are spiritual exiles, and the thing that is creating dissonance between them and their culture is the issue of holiness.

In other words, personal holiness is a central part of what it means to be an exile. Holiness creates the exile, and holiness is how one lives in exile. So, this is something to talk about, and, frankly, it is something that applies to every single person. After all, who doesn't need to grow in holiness at some level?

So far in 1 Peter we have learned that being in exile means seeing the bigger picture of what God is doing, understanding a believer's position in Christ, learning how to rejoice in difficult days, and (last week) making intentional biblical thinking a priority. Whether it is looking back at God's grace and realizing that you are "living the dream," or it is thinking the right thoughts so that you can believe the right promises, living as an exile is very practical and personal.

Our text this week helps us understand the importance of holiness as it relates to how we are to think about and live in our time of exile. Peter's central point here is simply that exiled living requires living in light of what Christians were saved from and what they were saved to. Or to state it even more specifically: Christian exiles are saved *from* unholiness and saved *for* holiness.

An exiled life is not holiness neutral. Let's unpack that.

Saved from Unholiness

As Peter takes up this issue of holiness, he starts by reminding these exiles both who they are and what they have been saved from. He uses this in order to motivate them not to go back to their former way of living. Peter reminds them about what they have been saved from in order to motivate them toward personal holiness.

How does he use their past to encourage holiness?

1. By reminding them about their new spiritual status as God's children

Peter's first step is connected to the words "as obedient children." He starts by reminding them about who they are and what their relationship with God is like. God is their Father. They are His children. And this is no small metaphor.

Being God's child means that something miraculous happens when a person puts his or her trust in Jesus. When you understand the depth of your sin, the beauty of forgiveness offered through Jesus,

and when you receive Jesus, a spiritual miracle happens that the Bible frequently describes as a birth or as being born again. A few examples:

The most well-known example of this is in John 3 where Jesus tells Nicodemus, “Truly, truly I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God” (John 3:3). The meaning is simply that a miraculous transformation happens inside the soul of a person. Being born again means that something so deep, so important, so spiritual, and so at the core of who you are, has been changed.

In 1 Peter this idea of being born again is used to capture the miraculous transformation that God worked in us:

- 1:3 – “According to his great mercy he has caused us to be born again to a living hope.”
- 1:22-23 – “. . . love one another earnestly from a pure heart since you have been born again”
- 2:2 – “Like newborn infants, long for the pure spiritual milk . . .”

Peter’s point in using this metaphor is to try and capture two things that happen in conversion. First, God does something to us that is miraculous. He changes us at a deep and fundamental level. Second, this act of God (regeneration) changes who we are, what we love, and what we do. That is why Peter says “as obedient children.”

People who are born again are not perfect, but the trajectory of their lives has been forever changed. Peter starts out his call for holiness by reminding these followers of Jesus who they are and what God has done for them. And he connects their status as God’s children with obedience. They were born again not merely for a future hope (1:13), but also so that they could live differently.

You see, being an exile is more than just mental assent to particular biblical truths; it means actually living out those truths in practical and personal ways that is different than how you used to live.

2. By calling them to not be conformed to their past lifestyle

The second phrase is Peter’s main point in verse 14. His main concern in this verse is that Christian exiles would not go back to their former way of living. In other words, being an exile means that the previous life you led is something that you fight going back to.

There are some really important words in this verse that we need to understand.

Their former life is described as “passions of your former ignorance.” This a more poignant way for Peter to identify what a person’s life prior to being born again really looks like. The word “ignorance” basically points to the fact that they did not know God in a personal way, and it had a direct impact on how they lived. And he identifies that this ignorance manifested itself in wrong desires and in loving bad things. The absence of a right relationship with God (not knowing God) created a life marked by ungodliness in desires and actions. In Ephesians 4:17-19, Paul makes this connection very clearly:

“Now this I say and testify in the Lord, that you must no longer walk as the Gentiles do, in the futility of their minds. They are darkened in their understanding, alienated from the life of God because of the

ignorance that is in them, due to their hardness of heart. They have become callous and have given themselves up to sensuality, greedy to practice every kind of impurity.” (Ephesians 4:17–19, ESV)

Do you see the connection between the mind, spiritual ignorance, a hard heart, and specific sinful actions? Peter is helping us to dissect our past by showing us the problem of godless passions. Peter doesn't just talk about the sinful actions or behaviors of the past; he actually gets more foundational. He addresses the sinful passions and desires that are central to why human beings need saving.

Can you relate to this? No matter how tame or wild your past, no matter where you are in your spiritual journey, if you take a step back, this makes sense, doesn't it? Our brokenness as human beings is far deeper and more tragic than just what we do. The brokenness of our sin directly affects what we desire, what we pursue, and what we celebrate. The tragedy of our lost and godless condition is that we are hell-bent on destroying our lives and the people around us while believing or convincing ourselves that this is the best way to live.

Every sinful action or behavior is rooted in wrong thoughts about God (even if they are temporary) and giving in to the wrong desires (even if it is just for a few seconds). To be a godly exile, you have to understand how this works! Actions are just the manifestation of a wrong view of God and allowing the wrong passions to rule you.

That is why Peter says “don't be conformed” to these ignorant passions. To be conformed means that there is a particular pattern or way of life that you are emulating. In Romans 12:2 where Paul says, “Don't be conformed to the world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind,” the focus is on the active resistance to the worship, thinking, and desires that characterize the world.

Believers have been miraculously changed in the new birth. They have been delivered from spiritual ignorance and the wrong desires that led them to destructive actions. In light of this, the followers of Jesus need to be careful that they not start to think, love, or act in a manner that is connected to their former, non-regenerate lives.

You see, one of the most dangerous and easy tendencies that hinders our holiness is forgetting what we were saved from and how serious the problem of our sin really was. Now I'm not suggesting that we over-compensate and wallow in our former failures. But there is something right and helpful about remembering where particular thoughts, desires, and attitudes led so that we can resist the gravitational pull of our former life.

J.C. Ryle (1816-1900) was the 19th century Bishop of Liverpool, and he wrote what is probably the seminal book on holiness. Here is what he said:

He that wishes to attain right views about Christian holiness, must begin by examining the vast and solemn subject of sin. He must dig down very low if he would build high. A mistake here is most mischievous. Wrong views about holiness are generally traceable to wrong views about human corruption.¹

¹ J.C. Ryle, *Holiness – Its Nature, Hindrances, Difficulties and Roots*, (London: James Clarke and Co, 1956), 1.

Do you see your past through this lens? Can you be both thankful for what God has saved you from and also be committed to watching out for thought patterns or actions that start you on a path that is not going to lead to victory? Are there particular relationships that you know are having more influence on you than what they should? Are you flirting around with something that “burned you” before? Is there anything over which you should say, “God saved me from that; why am I messing around with this?”

The battle for holiness is not just an issue of what we do. God saved us from more than just the wrong actions. He saved us from wrong affections and wrong desires. Being a holy exile means that you “get that” and that your posture is toward not conforming to what your life used to be like in terms of what you love, what you desire, and what you do.

Saved for Holiness

Living as an exile means that we know what we are saved from, but that is not all. Peter’s charge here involves not only a command to not be conformed to the passions of our former ignorance, but also a command to be holy. God saves people in order to make them holy – both in the future and right now.

After identifying how believing exiles are not to go back to their former lives, Peter then issues a call for us to be a people marked by holiness. Notice how he does this.

1. By knowing what God is like

Remember how verse 14 started? “As obedient children.” In verse 15 Peter starts with another comparison: “as he who called you is holy . . .” Peter reminds them that the God who rescued them, caused them to be born again, and who called them, is holy.

What do I mean by “holy”? To be holy means that God is separated from sin and is devoted to seeking His own glory and honor in that holiness.² Holiness means a pure and unadulterated love in what is right, pure, true, and perfect. It means a righteousness and a justice that are so central to the very essence of God that His glory and His holiness are one and the same. The holiness of God is so foundational to who He is such that there is no one like Him. Last week’s fighter verse from Isaiah 46:9-10 captures it well:

“ . . . I am God, and there is no other; I am God, and there is none like me, declaring the end from the beginning and from ancient times things not yet done, saying, ‘My counsel shall stand, and I will accomplish all my purpose,’” (Isaiah 46:9–10, ESV)

Why is there no other? Why is there none like Him? Why can He declare the end from the beginning? Why does His counsel stand? Because God is infinitely, majestically, eternally, thoroughly, righteously, and terrifyingly holy! No sin. No impure motive. No unrighteousness. Never lies. Never wrong. Never unfaithful. Always true and right and lovely.

² Wayne Grudem, *1 Peter – Tyndale NT Commentaries*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 79.

I remember reading R.C. Sproul's book, *The Holiness of God*, in my dorm room during my freshman year, and it rocked my world. I began to see afresh and anew that God had saved me not just from my sins but in order to bring me to His holiness. I began to see that my sin wasn't a problem just because it was wrong but because it violated the very essence of who God is. I saw my sin differently. I saw grace differently. I saw God differently.

And in the love for His holiness, I wanted more holiness in me! There is a direct relationship between your intimacy with and understanding of who God is and your affection for personal holiness. Or as Kevin DeYoung, in his book *The Hole in our Holiness* says, there is a familiar and tragic gap for many Christians between their love for the gospel and their love for godliness. Do you know why that is?

It is because there are some people who come to Jesus because they want the assurance that they when they die, they won't go to hell. But I have to tell you that if that is the only reason why you come to Jesus, you didn't come to Jesus. You see, Jesus comes to call you out of darkness and into light, from a life a self-centeredness to a life of God-centeredness, a life where you hated God's holiness to a life that loves God's holiness.

Here is how J.C. Ryle helps us think about our love of holiness:

"Most men hope to go to heaven when they die; but few, it may be feared, take the trouble to consider whether they would enjoy heaven if they got there. Heaven is essentially a holy place; its inhabitants are all holy; its occupations are all holy. To be really happy in heaven, it is clear and plain that we must be somewhat trained and made ready for heaven while we are on earth. . . we must be saints before we die, if we are to be saints afterward in glory. . . It is common to hear people saying on their deathbeds, "I only want the Lord to forgive me my sins, and take me to rest." But those who say such things forget that the rest of heaven would be utterly useless if have no heart to enjoy it!"³

A love for holiness starts with a love for God and his holiness.

2. By knowing what the Scriptures say about God's people

The second statement that Peter makes is in regard to what the Scriptures themselves, especially the Old Testament Scriptures, say about God's people and holiness. Peter aims to demonstrate that this commitment and call to holiness is not a new idea. In fact, it has marked the people of God from the very beginning.

It is interesting to note a pattern here in 1 Peter. If you just start to get an overview of 1 Peter, you'll notice how often Peter grounds something he says in another quotation of Scripture. For example, he does this at the end of chapter 1 by quoting Isaiah 40. Peter loved the Bible, and he anchors what he says in the Old Testament.

Now we don't know which particular passage he is quoting in verse 16. There are a number of passages that make this statement (see Lev. 11:44-45; 19:2; 20:26). The point is simply that God's plan

³ J. C. Ryle, *Holiness: Its Nature, Hindrances, Difficulties, and Roots*. (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2007), 29

has always been to magnify His name on earth by a people who are holy. That was the reason that the Law was given. God intended to distinguish His people from all other peoples so that they would be a light for the nations. The distinct holiness of Israel was a central part of God's mission to reach the other nations.

In the same way, these New Testament believers were becoming increasingly distinct from the rest of the world. Remember theirs was not a geographical exile but a moral exile. Later on, we will hear these words from Peter:

"Beloved, I urge you as sojourners and exiles to abstain from the passions of the flesh, which wage war against your soul. Keep your conduct among the Gentiles honorable, so that when they speak against you as evildoers, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day of visitation." (1 Peter 2:11–12, ESV)

Now I'm not advocating some kind of cultural retreat or a Christian ghetto mentality. But I do think that it is important for us to realize that part of what it means, at some level, to be a Christian is that you are different than the rest of the people around you who do not share the same beliefs. Followers of Jesus are called to be separate without being separatists. We are called to be different without being odd. We are called to be holy without being holier than thou.

Listen! Something has to be different about us or why in the world would the world listen to the gospel? Our holiness comes out of the gospel but it also makes the gospel credible in the world. And a part of me wonders if part of the tension that some of us feel with the shift in culture is owing to the fact that we really do not want to be so different. It may be that the tension with the exiled life is because we really want a God that fits nicely within our culture, not a culture that has to conform to a holy God.

Once again, Peter is simply reminding us that "living the dream" means a love for holiness.

3. By applying holiness in all our conduct

Finally, we get to the actual command which is: "you also be holy in all your conduct." I've left this for last because if you don't get the previous thoughts right, you'll never live out holiness in your personal life. And even if you did, it would just be another exercise in legalism because you were doing it because of what others thought of you or an exercise in moralism because you wanted to feel good about yourself. Personal holiness springs out of a God-created vision and love for His holiness.

The exiled life is one that is completely effected by the grace of God and the rule of Jesus. It means that every part of a Christian's life is somehow impacted by God's calling of holiness. It means that we love the holiness of God so much that we want to see it touch every area of our lives. It means that we are so in awe of Jesus that we want Him to rule our minds, our eyes, our mouths, our bodies, our sexuality, where we go, what we do, how we do it, and with whom we do it.

To what extent does that describe you right now? How active are you in applying the holiness of God in your life? Kevin DeYoung asks something very helpful:

When was the last time you took a verse like, “Let there be no filthiness nor foolish talk nor crude joking, which are out of place, but instead let there be thanksgiving” (Eph. 5:14) and even began to try to apply this to our conversation, our movies, our YouTube clips, our television and commercial intake? What does it mean that there must be even a hint of immorality among the saints (v. 3)? It must mean something. In our sex-saturated culture, I would be surprised if there were not at least a few hints of immorality in our texts and tweets and inside jokes. And what about our clothes, our music, our flirting and the way we talk about people who aren’t in the room? If the war on poverty is worth fighting, how much more the war on your own sin?⁴

Let me ask a few more questions. Are you a good friend, helping others to be holy? Is anyone helping you in your holiness? It may be that a big part of the problem is your unwillingness to allow other people to speak into your life. Your holiness is flagging because you have proudly convinced yourself that you don’t need others.

Finally, let’s be honest. There’s not a person in our church who doesn’t need to grow in some area of holiness in his or her life. Can I issue you a challenge? Can you do a holiness audit this morning and determine what is one thing that needs to change between now and Thanksgiving?

Maybe you need to give something up, not because it’s wrong but because it’s not helpful. Maybe you need to start memorizing the Word. Maybe you need to take the step of being baptized and joining this church. Maybe you need to get into a small group or a discipleship group. Maybe you need to start reading the Bible more often or with someone else. Maybe you need to find someone to help you with a besetting sin. Maybe you need to come and put your faith in Jesus today and become a Christian.

I don’t know where you are at today, but I know two things for sure: Our God is holy, and He saved us so that we could be holy.

I don’t know what the word “holy” meant to you when you came in today, but I hope you’ll leave with a great longing in your heart to pray, “Lord, help me to be holy!”

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⁴ Kevin DeYoung, *The Hole in our Holiness*, (Wheaton: Crossway, 2012), 20-21