

SUNDAY SCHOOL LESSONS
Commentary by Michael Sigler
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A Holy People

1 Peter 1:13-25

Key verses: “As he who called you is holy, be holy yourselves in all your conduct; for it is written, ‘You shall be holy, for I am holy’” (1 Peter 1:15-16).

When it comes to understanding what it means to be “holy,” people today are, at best, *confused*. A survey of opinions concerning holiness, published by the Barna Group, showed the following: Three out of every four Americans (73 percent) believe that it is possible for someone to become holy, regardless of their past. However, only 50 percent said that they know someone they consider to be holy. And when asked if they themselves are holy, only 21 percent answered yes. (“*The Concept of Holiness Baffles Most Americans*,” www.barna.org 2-20-06)

It’s not clear why people are baffled about holiness. One likely reason, though, is that many people associate personal holiness with *sinless perfection*. It is here that our Wesleyan understanding is so helpful.

John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, taught that—through the new birth—Christians can experience great freedom from the power of sin. Though the potential to sin always remains, Wesley taught that no Christian *has* to live in sin. Steve Harper said it this way: “Wesley makes it clear that sin remains in the one who is justified, but it does not have to reign” (from *The Way to Heaven*, Zondervan).

Wesley believed deeply that God’s grace, which comes to us through the new birth, is able to free the Christian from both sin’s *penalty* and sin’s *power*. Through faith in Christ, we enter in to a new life of transformation and growth in *Christ-likeness*. So, for Wesley, God’s power to make people Christ-like, or holy, is at the heart of the Gospel. The promise of holiness was so central to Wesley’s message that he said his objective, and that of Methodism, was “to spread Scriptural holiness over the land.”

Our text for this week, 1 Peter 1:13-25, has some important things to say about living a holy life.

First, a holy life is both a *gracious possibility* and a *divine command*: “As he who called you is holy, be holy yourselves in all your conduct; for it is written, ‘You shall be holy, for I am holy’” (vv. 15-16). God, through Christ, wants to transform every believer. The goal of conversion is Christ-likeness, or holiness. God graciously meets us *where we are*, but God loves us too much to leave us *as we are*. The

moment a person says yes to Christ, God begins a work of grace that, over time, transforms the believer. The goal is *growth toward Christ-likeness*.

Secondly, this passage in 1 Peter speaks of two motivations for holy living. One motivation to live a holy life is the conviction that God is both our Father and our Judge (v. 17). Knowing that we all must one day give an account for how we have lived, we should seek God's grace to turn from sin and grow in holiness.

A second motivation for holy living is found in verses 18-19: "You know that you were ransomed from the futile ways inherited from your ancestors, not with perishable things like silver or gold, but with the precious blood of Christ, like that of a lamb without defect or blemish." Knowing what it cost for God to save us—"the precious blood of Christ"—should motivate us to grow in grace and Christ-likeness.

Thirdly, this passage speaks of two ways in which believers grow in holiness.

One way in which we grow toward Christ-likeness is found in verses 13-15: "Therefore prepare your minds for action; discipline yourselves...." (v. 13). In other words, holiness does not happen without our active participation. Only God can make us holy, but God won't make us holy without our active participation. *Discipline* is required, as well as a desire to be changed by God's grace: "Like obedient children, do not be conformed to the desires that you formerly had in ignorance. Instead...be holy...." (vv. 14-15a).

A second way in which believers grow in holiness involves *an inner change of the heart* that affects the way we, outwardly, live our lives. That heart change begins when a person receives Christ as Savior: As 1 Peter reminds us: "You have been born anew...." (v. 23).

The new birth, said John Wesley, is "that great change which God works in the soul when He brings it into life; when He raises it from the death of sin to the life of righteousness." When a person says yes to Christ, God not only forgives his sin and gives the gift of eternal life. God also begins a lifelong work of *transforming* that person into Christ-likeness, or holiness.

This journey toward Christ-likeness is, from start to finish, a work of grace. But it always requires our active participation. John Wesley taught that our part in Christian growth includes using "the means of grace": *prayer, searching the Scriptures, The Lord's Supper, fasting, and group fellowship*.

Steve Harper wrote: "At the heart of it was Wesley's conviction that growth in grace is not accidental or automatic. One does not wander or stumble into maturity. On God's side, He does not save us and then tell us to do the best we can. Rather, he supplies specific instruments through which He can nurture us." [These instruments for spiritual growth include the 'means of grace.']

"There will always be highs and lows, ups and downs, advances and declines. Christians have good days and bad days, just like everyone else....The key to

Christian growth is not feeling but *faithfulness*. God has expressed his faithfulness by providing means of grace. We express our faithfulness by taking advantage of them. And in that divine/human encounter, the connection is made, grace flows into our lives, and we are led to greater conformity to the image of Christ.” (*The Way to Heaven*).

So, holiness is all about the marvelous change that God makes in people who trust in and follow after Jesus Christ. Holiness is the birthright of every believer. The Good News is, we do not have to live under the bondage of sin. Through Christ, we are set free to live a new life— a life of grace, a life of liberty, and a life of transformation into Christ-likeness.

Charles Wesley said it best in his great Methodist hymn “And Can It Be”:

Long my imprisoned spirit lay

Fast bound in sin and nature’s night.

Thine eye diffused a quickening ray;

I woke—the dungeon flamed with light!

My chains fell off, my heart was free,

I rose, went forth, and followed thee!

Thanks be to God!

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