

The Struggle for Holiness in 1 Peter by Chuck Jones

Introduction

The whole of the letter revolves around the imperative, “be holy.”¹ We can see in this general epistle the fulfillment of Christ’s imperative for Peter: “When you are converted, strengthen your brothers,” and “Feed my sheep.”² Indeed, not only in this epistle do we witness this, but in the record of his sermons in Acts as well.

Of all the imperatives found in 1 Peter the call to holiness is the major one that Peter is striving to lead us to. This is to say that the multitude of imperatives point to, and are subservient to, being holy.

Holiness because of God

We are elect (Greek *eklektos*) because of the planned purpose of God from before the world began.³ God’s purpose for us involves sanctification of the spirit (from the Greek word *hagiasmos* which in other places is translated holiness). Sanctification is used in the N.T. of the separation of the believer from evil things and ways.⁴ The election of God and the work of the spirit has a purpose, according to Peter, that is obedience in response to what has been done for us, and what can be expected in the future. “Obeying Jesus and being sprinkled with his blood” nicely sums up our initial obedient response to the Gospel of the Kingdom in addition to our acceptance of the Messiah’s shed blood. All this involves a proper hearing and understanding which is given by the spirit, then which presupposes our responsibility. This is the theme Peter carries throughout his letter, which is based on the sprinkling of the blood of Jesus Christ, as a sign of God’s covenant.⁵ Peter describes our standing before God, and our responsibility to it.

Peter stresses the salvation God has bought for us in verses 3-5. Peter used the term “blessed” in connection with God⁶ and indeed what follows is praiseworthy. Because of God’s mercy (which is more than we can fathom), He has given us living hope by showing Himself faithful and trustworthy in raising Jesus from the dead. We don’t have just a theory, but a real hope. This living hope can’t be taken away. This of course does not negate our ability to reject it. God will let each person decide.

Although our living hope is cause for great rejoicing, there are difficulties in life that bring distress. The various trials (which are expanded on later in the letter), have a proving effect upon our faith. When our faith is tried and proven genuine, it is more precious than any earthly treasure, and will be for our praise, honor and glory when Christ returns. As Jesus, we can endure the present distress, for the joy that is set before us. Even though the original readers had not seen Jesus, they believed in, and loved him. This has direct application for us which goes without saying.

¹ 1 Peter 1:16

² Luke 22:32 and John 21:15-17

³ 2 Timothy 1:9

⁴ . W.E, Vine, Vines Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words Fleming H. Revell Co. Old Tappan New Jersey. Pg. 317

⁵ After Moses had built an altar, took the blood from the burnt and peace offerings and sprinkled the altar with half of that blood. Following this he read the covenant and the people said they would be obedient. He then sprinkled the people with the remaining blood, pronouncing it to be the blood of the covenant (Exodus 24:3-8)..

⁶ Greek *eulogetos* is used only for God. Vines pg. 133

The salvation that produces this unspeakable joy was of great interest to the prophets. The basis of their work pointed to what we now possess. They, however, talked about things that would be years in the future. The angels even took an interest. “The very fact that angels know so much enhances the sense of wonder at the things they do not know.”⁷ Peter may be thinking of Jesus’ statement: “But blessed are your eyes for they see, and your ears for they hear. For assuredly, I say to you that many prophets and righteous men desired to see what you see, and did not see it, and hear what you hear but did not hear it.”⁸ Here Peter stresses the desire of angels and the men of God to understand the great salvation which has been accomplished for us. “Only after affirming the beauty and power of the Christian vocation and the new mode of existence into which they have been drawn does the author proceed to the demands of living out this new mode of existence.”⁹ In this entire portion Peter seems to be wanting us to be sure we realize what has been done for us. This passage is foundational for what is to follow.

Peter introduces our responsibility with the imperative “gird up the loins of your mind.” Therefore as a result of the preceding truth, get ready for the time until Jesus Christ is revealed. The subject of holiness is opening here by the example of preparation. Many commentators compare this with the first Passover when the people were to be prepared to move out of Egypt. Ours is not a literal moving, seen by the way we are to prepare. It will take a sober mind, “one that is free from intoxicants”¹⁰ of the world, and be settled in the hope we have at the revelation of Jesus Christ. It is important that our hope have the same effect on us that Jesus’ hope had on him; to remain steadfast and unmovable.

Living up to our responsibilities will result in the old life being replaced by a new one. Repentance is not mentioned directly in 1 Peter, but the activity of repenting is so often alluded to. Peter describes the manifestations of repentance without using the word. The full measure of repentance, that is the final goal, of “turning from the former ways,” is holiness. Any recess from that “repenting” activity works against holiness. It was ignorance that brought about the former lifestyle with its lusts.¹¹ We should always be active in our turning from the world and the desires it fosters.

To dispel that ignorance Peter gets right to the point. “But as He who called you is holy, you also be holy in all your conduct.”¹² As we shall see, Peter applies this imperative to all forms of behavior, and all areas of life. There is no “compartment” in life which is beyond the scope of “all your conduct.” This is not a holiness which is separated from the world, as ascetics would be,¹³ but Peter brings holiness into daily interaction within the world.¹⁴

To reinforce Peter’s imperative he quotes from Leviticus, a demand and fact that has never changed, “Be holy for I am holy.”¹⁵ “And” Peter continues, if you call on the Father, remember, He is the one who judges every one’s work. “Christians are not exempt from judgment just

⁷ Word Bible Commentary, Word Books, Waco Texas. J. Ramsey Michaels. Vol 49 1 Peter, pg. 48

⁸ Matthew 13:16-17

⁹ Sacra Pagina Series, The Liturgical Press, Collegeville, Minn. 203, Donald Senior. 1 Peter Vol 15 pg. 41.

¹⁰ Ibid, Vines, Vol 4, pg. 44

¹¹ A distinction has been made, between being ignorant and being bad, by Santayana. Although the outcome may look the same, the motive is quite different.

¹² 1Peter 1:15

¹³ Too often the idea of not conforming to the world meant getting into the mountains and isolation from the world. This is not what Peter is presenting.

¹⁴ Ibid, Word Biblical Commentaries, pg. 57

¹⁵ A quote from Leviticus 11:44-45; 19:2; 20:26. These verses reveal that holiness is connected to: 1) daily living, 2) because God brought them out of Egypt, 3) in spiritual matters, and 4) because the people belong to Him.

because they address God as father; on the contrary they will face the universal judgment of God before everyone else.¹⁶ That fact should lead to fear that influences our behavior¹⁷ which will drive us toward holiness. Peter wants to impress this truth.

Our redemption and atonement, is in part, from the old empty way of life that we received by our heritage. Again, here the idea of repentance is set forth. We were purchased from that empty lifestyle our fathers taught us with a purchase price far more valuable than any earthly treasure. Peter reinforces the fact that this was long planned for in order that we can have faith and hope in God.

Peter makes a transition to the ethical portion of his letter by reminding his readers of their progress so far. They have purified their lives by obeying the truth and been born again by the incorruptible word of God that abides forever. This recalls the parable of the sower which likewise combines rebirth under the influence of the word/seed Gospel of the Kingdom (Matt. 13:19; Luke 8:11, 12). They have started down the road toward holiness (sanctification), but have not reached the destination. Here Peter goes into his teaching on holiness in daily living as a result of what God has done. This will lead to the inheritance of the Kingdom in the age to come.

To conclude this section, holiness for the believers is not an option when one considers what God has done for us, and the great lengths God has gone to, to secure His plan for our salvation. The holiness Peter calls us to is similar to the perfection Jesus call us to¹⁸. It should not be thought of as sinlessness, but rather obedience and maturity. Holiness and perfection, like ageing, won't be concluded until we die. We must keep working towards them without any recess or vacation from the process.

Holiness is a matter of personal responsibility

Peter puts the responsibility for holiness squarely on the shoulders of the believer. The phrases: "Since you have purified your souls," contrasted with "being born again,"¹⁹ clearly show that the salvation equation has man's side and God's. It's man's side that Peter directs the majority of the remainder of the letter to.

In response to God, as stated above, Peter drives us to some practical results of hearing the gospel²⁰ which amounts to repentance from malice, deceit, hypocrisy, envy, and evil speaking. These are not to simply be refrained from, because this would not work to bring holiness, they are to be replaced by truth from God's word. The putting off, putting on process is clearly an activity of repentance. It is through repentance that holiness can be obtained. In other words it means seeing this world, what it offers, and the suffering we endure through different eyes.

The struggle for holiness in various life situations

One's station in life does not insure nor deny gaining holiness. Starting at the bottom of the social ladder, Peter speaks to the condition of slaves, in the worst possible situation; having a perverse master. Here is one of Peter's many imperatives, "be submissive (or defer) to your masters."²¹ Holiness does not require "good and gentle masters", it requires submissiveness, to

¹⁶ Ibid, Word Biblical Commentaries, pg. 61. This point is also addressed in 1 Peter 4:17

¹⁷ I am reminded of the thief hung with Jesus, that admonished the other thief, "Don't you fear God? We got what we had coming, but this man did no wrong" Luke 23:40:41

¹⁸ Matt. 5:48 However one determines God's maturity, that is what we should strive for.

¹⁹ Chapter 1:22-23

²⁰ Chapter 1:25-2:1 is the conclusion with the words, "now" and "therefore" which brings us to a proper response.

²¹ Chapter 2:18

even the harsh. This submissiveness is ultimately to God. With this in mind then, suffering on the part of the slave for doing what is considered a duty, with patience, brings God's grace. "...there is grace (i.e., credit with God) reserved for the patient endurance of unjust punishment or of suffering for doing good"²² This "credit with God," is the substance of holiness. It is His presence in the life of a believer that is being sanctified. Being holy through submissiveness to God in the harsh situations of life shows one's level of holiness. It is the ability to find peace in the presence of God in the hard times. As the Apostle Paul wrote, "His spirit bears witness with our spirit that we are His children."²³

Moving up the social ladder we come to wives

With the same language, Peter addresses the married women. Although Peter gives more space to the wives than husbands it "indicates the author's consistent interest in the subordinate or potentially oppressed partner in any given relationship."²⁴ So here too, the wife is to be submissive to her husband, whether believer or not. The connection to holiness can be seen in Peter's use of "conduct" which refers back to Cp. 1:15. That holy conduct may win over an unbelieving husband. However, that should not be the goal of a holy life, because the husband may not be won. Peter lists ways in which holiness is accomplished beyond submissiveness. Outward adornment should be replaced with a gentle and quiet spirit. He uses Sarah as an example. What God considers important, must supersede what women think is important, or else they will not see the beauty in a gentle and quiet spirit. These are qualities the wives can have in common with Jesus, which points to holiness.

The next rung of the social ladder is occupied by husbands.

"Husbands, you too, have to know how to live holy lives with your wives." The husbands are not directed toward any specific sort of suffering, but are told to live with the women with understanding. As in the previous two situations, the husbands are required to put effort into their actions toward their wives, which will show holiness. They need to show understanding, and show honor to the wife. Paul also points this fact out when he says that we should have a "condescending" attitude toward others.²⁵ The connection here to holiness is evident in the phrase: "that your prayers are not hindered." The lifestyle Peter is addressing shows a close connection with God, one in which prayers are effective and an attitude of dependence is displayed.

The highest rung on the ladder that Peter addresses is occupied by elders

Peter addresses the elders as "fellow elders," and exhorts them, not in terms of qualifications, but in terms of how the elders should oversee the flock. It is thought that this does not refer to an early organizational structure. "The elders do not occupy positions in a hierarchalized organizational structure, of which there is no hint in 1 Peter. It is thus inappropriate and anachronistic to speak of them as officials or officeholders. They are, rather, leaders whose authority is conferred by tradition and who exercise traditionally associated roles and functions. It is conceivable that, as elders, the leaders of the community could have been particular targets of hostility, but 1 Peter says nothing of this and focuses exclusive attention on their

²² Ibid Word Bible Commentary pg. 139.

²³ Romans 8:16.

²⁴ Ibid Word Bible Commentary pg. 155.

²⁵ Romans 12:16. Condescending is the word used in the KJV. "Associate with" is used in the NKJV.

responsibilities *within the communities*.”²⁶ These elders, Peter addresses from a three sided foundation. 1), As being a fellow elder, 2), as a witness of the sufferings of Christ, and 3), as a partaker of glory. The exhortation comes from one who understands the responsibilities of elders, the cost of salvation, and what the future holds. Each of these is linked to the imperative of being holy. The elders are urged to “shepherd” the flock after the example of the chief Shepherd. This tells us the man’s holiness or sanctification is to be single-minded in the deployment of their duties. Peter calls them to a willing service²⁷ that would exclude any thoughts of monetary gain. Here the Lords words of serving two masters find good application.²⁸ Holiness cannot be obtained in a double minded person. Peter again refers to the teaching of Jesus about those who would be great.²⁹ “Don’t act as masters toward those who were entrusted to you, but be the examples.” Those who are entrusted, are held in higher regard, to those to whom they have been entrusted. Jesus came as a servant, thus disregarding his own reputation and humbling himself in obedience and suffering for the lost. As the chief Shepherd, he is the example of how holiness is displayed in the elders. Elders do not, by the title obtain holiness, rather holy man obtained the title of elder. This clarification should be enacted in churches today.

Holiness and suffering

Suffering has much attention in 1 Peter. The suffering Peter addresses is not connected with official Roman persecution. Guthrie works through some general provincial persecutions and shows how these all occurred well after the date of Peter’s writing.³⁰ In fact Guthrie notes that there is “nothing that really differentiates these persecutions from others mentioned in the New Testament.” C.F.D. Moule states “it seems to me that all the requirements of these passages are equally well met by postulating on official persecutions — harrying by the Jews and pagans.” He goes on to say, “it is worthwhile to note that in 1 Peter 4:4 there is a reference to precisely such social ostracism and unpopularity as might lead to open persecution of this sort, without any state intervention.”³¹ The suffering Peter is addressing, I think, comes from an unbelieving community, masters, husbands, old friends and Jews. Therefore the instructions given are applicable for us today. We may not all suffer in the same way, or from the same sources, but when we do suffer as believers and not wrongdoers, it puts a strain on our holiness.

Holiness and suffering through a co-perception with God. Peter points out that one’s “conscience toward God” can be cause to endure grief and suffering when we don’t deserve it. As Peter H. Davidson says, “what he means, then, is that God is pleased with Christian slaves who bear up under unjust suffering, not because there is no other option or because of their optimistic character, but because they know this pleases God and conforms to the teachings of Jesus.”³² The “co-perception” is understanding the sufferings in the same way God does. Having the mind of Christ is impossible apart from sanctification and holiness. For that reason I

²⁶The Anchor Bible, 1 Peter, a New translation with Introduction and Commentary. John H. Elliott. Doubleday 2000. Pgs 815-816. Emphasis original.

²⁷ This may show that elders were not just the older man in the congregation, but those who were deemed worthy of this title.

²⁸ Matthew 6:24

²⁹ Matthew 20:25-28. This teaching seems to have lost its force by the time of Ignatius who wrote to the Ephesians. He said, “... it is clear that we must regard a bishop as the Lord himself.” Paragraph 6.

³⁰ New Testament introduction, Donald Guthrie, Inter Varsity Press. Third edition 1970, pages 781-782

³¹ The Nature and Purpose of 1 Peter, A Journal article, New Testament Studies, vol 3. No. 1, 1956 pgs. 7-8.

³² The First Epistle of Peter, the New International Commentary on the New Testament, Erdman’s publishing Co. Grand Rapids. Pg 107.

understand that enduring suffering as Peter prescribes is not possible apart from being holy, and this type of suffering, does in fact leads us to greater holiness. The same co-perception is brought out in cp. 4:12-14. Peter speaks directly to how we think about the trials we face. The term “fiery” denotes even the harshest trial, yet this is still a subjective definition. Rather than thinking as unbelievers do, we are to consider this something we can have in common with Jesus, which is a cause for joy. We should think about suffering as a blessing, because God’s spirit rests on us. Giving consideration to suffering in this way comes only because we have “girded up the loins of our minds” and see this world, and its suffering through the eyes of Jesus.

Innocent suffering

Peter argues for a change of thinking by saying, “for it is better if it is the will of God, to suffer for doing good than doing evil.”³³ also that we should not be “ashamed if we suffer as a Christian, rather our response should be to give glory to God.”³⁴ Peter isn’t writing this as a theory, but it has evidence in his life. After the council, Peter and the other Apostles wear beaten for preaching in the name of Jesus, they “departed from the presence of the council rejoicing that they were worthy to suffer shamed for his name.”³⁵ It takes a sanctified mind to see suffering this way. Indeed we should see all difficulties in relation to God.

Suffering for being guilty

Taking one’s punishment patiently, when it is deserved, for Peter carries little (or no) merit. Where is the credit? I think this is a parallel to Jesus’ teaching about loving those who love you, and doing good to those who do the same in return.³⁶ This too, takes a new way of thinking that demands going beyond, as Jesus instructed, “so likewise you, when you have done all those things you are commanded, say, we are unprofitable servants. We have done only what was our duty to do.”³⁷ As Jesus taught, where is a credit when you do what is easy? Peter picks this up and applies it to suffering punishment when we do what is our duty to do. Holiness then means going beyond what comes easy. Just as Jesus has shown us.

Jesus is our example in suffering and sanctification.

Peter continually appeals to the example of Jesus, as that which should be followed, as are called.³⁸ “For to this purpose you were called. The pronoun $\theta\Phi\beta\theta\Phi$ looks backward rather than ahead, for it corresponds to the repeated $\theta\Phi\beta\theta\Phi$ with which Peter framed versus 19-20. The verb $\Xi 6802, \theta$, points to the reader’s conversion from pagans; if the ultimate goal of that conversion is God’s marvelous light (2:9) or his eternal glory(5:10), it’s near goal is holiness (1:15) or as here, the doing of good even when it means suffering.”³⁹ We are following in the way Jesus lived, especially in the face of verbal and physical abuse. Here Peter gives us an understanding of the mind of Christ. Jesus, when receiving insults, and suffering he did not return insults nor threaten. This behavior is reinforced in cp 3:9, again connected with our calling. “Therefore” Peter says, since “Christ suffered for us in the flesh, arm yourselves with the

³³ Cp. 3:17.

³⁴ Cp. 4:16.

³⁵ Acts 5:17-42.

³⁶ Luke 6:32-34

³⁷ Luke 17:10.

³⁸ Cp. 2:21.

³⁹ Ibid. Word Bible commentary. Vol 49. Pg 142. I have use the Greek characters without knowing for sure if they are correct.

same mind, for he who has suffered in the flesh has ceased from sin.”⁴⁰ Peter is connecting cp. 3:18 with cp 4:2-3. If we arm ourselves with the same sort of thinking that is found in Jesus that will lead to suffering in the flesh, which will lead to a cessation of sin. The confusion about this verse disappears when we understand as applied to ourselves and not Jesus. Peter goes directly to the lust of men and will of the Gentiles, which points out a different sort of “suffering in the flesh” than from outside sources. The “suffering” Peter here refers to is a suffering when our flesh doesn’t get its way. When our flesh, like a spoiled, undisciplined child throws a tantrum to get its way, we must make it suffer. The apostle Paul uses terminology such as, “I disciplined my body, and bring it into subjection”⁴¹ and in a more serious way, “but if by the spirit you put to death the deeds of the flesh, you will live”⁴² and “therefore put to death your members.”⁴³ the contrast can clearly be seen when we consider the imperative “do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God,”⁴⁴ in connection with “grieving the flesh.” I would assert that we will do one or the other when we are faced with temptations to sin. I think it is clear to see that Peter is giving us direct instruction in regard to our holiness, as it depends on how we think.⁴⁵ We need to be imitators of Christ, not only in our actions, but also in how we perceive the world and especially suffering. Whether that suffering comes from the hand of men or the suffering of our own flesh.

Holiness and relation to others

These instructions are given not so much as specifics, but these are more general in nature in the community of believers as those outside are concerned.

Those outside or unbelievers are often referred to as Gentiles. This agrees with Peter’s use of Jewish phrases and symbols,⁴⁶ even though he is addressing an audience of mixed nationalities, Peter combines them into one group, “His (God’s) own special people.” As God’s people, we are called to holiness, there are responsibilities we have to those outside. As sojourners and pilgrims in this present world we all are to refuse participation in fleshly lusts replacing them with “honorable conduct” which reflects holiness. This, Peter says, will bring the Gentiles to glorify God. As Jesus taught, “let your lights so shine before men that they may see your good works and glorify your father in heaven.”⁴⁷ On the other side, Peter tells us to “sanctify the Lord in our hearts” so that we can give a reason for the hope we have.⁴⁸ Again the conduct of holiness, in meekness and fear (of God) will bring the unbelievers to shame when they insult our good conduct. These insults and slander may also come, as Peter points out, from the fact that we no longer run with our old friends as we once did.⁴⁹ They will face judgment and will be required to give an answer to God. Peter covers these three outcomes of the confrontation between our “good conduct” with unbelievers in this way. They may glorify God, or be ashamed, but ultimately will stand before God himself.

⁴⁰ Cp. 4:1.

⁴¹ 1 Cor. 9:24

⁴² Rom. 8:13.

⁴³ Col. 3:6.

⁴⁴ Eph. 4:30.

⁴⁵ The same idea of renewing our mind is found in ch 1:13.

⁴⁶ Peter’s use of dispersion (1:1), sprinkling of the blood (1:2), the connection of profits and angels (1:24-25; 2:6-8;22), strangers and Pilgrims (2:11), Psalms (3:10-12), and proverbs (4:18;5:5), point to the Jewishness of our faith.

⁴⁷ Matt. 5:16.

⁴⁸ Cp.3:15.

⁴⁹ Cp. 4:4-5.

The government is included in Peter's instructions as an entity that we must deal with in holiness. Because of the Lord we are to defer to the king, governors, or those who are there are representatives. Hereto, Peter connects our good conduct (holy living) with the battle we have with ignorance and foolishness. Humility is one of our indicators.

The community of believers

Our behavior in the group receives a lot of attention from Peter. We are to love each other honestly. Not as one who puts up a front but "fervently with a pure heart."⁵⁰ this means, therefore to remove lying, malice, envy, hypocrisy, and deceit.⁵¹ By doing this, then, believers can be of one mind. This doesn't mean there is to be an agreement on every opinion, "but in the sense of being agreeable and sensitive to each others' concerns."⁵² "One mind" is described in terms of compassion, brotherly love, humility, peacemaking, blessing, and hospitality without grumbling,⁵³ toward each other. Indeed, for this to become a reality, each individual must "Gird up the loins of his mind" and "be holy." The gifts each one receives are to be used to minister to each other so that ultimately God is glorify through Jesus Christ.⁵⁴ This is all summed up by "submit to each other in humility because we each stand responsible before God."⁵⁵

Peter also frames the goal of holiness in eschatological terms.

As the Apostle Paul mentioned in 1 Corinthians 15: 19, "if in this life only we have hope in Christ, we are of all men the most miserable." Holy living now does not guarantee a happy life now. But we are to look toward the future. This is what Peter directs us toward in his letter. He makes reference to the inheritance that is reserved for us in heaven, our salvation that is ready to be revealed at the last time, the end of all things are at hand, and the coming of the chief Shepherd.

Peter definitely looks forward to the time when Christ returns. Peter indicates that holiness now in our lives is an indication of all we are looking forward to. When our faith is tried, and proved genuine, it will give us reason for glory praise and honor when Jesus comes.

And consideration of the judgment Peter warns us that the judgment will first begin at the house of God. Then he reminds us that if the "righteous are scarcely saved where will the ungodly sinner appear?" For Peter it appears that holy living is not an option. Whether in this life are as we approach the judgment and the life to come. Peter seems to agreeing with the Apostle Paul that this life is not the only time that we have hope in Christ Jesus. Holy living is not for this present world only but has reward in the aged to come.

This is the grace in which we stand. It is by God's grace that we have, not only the hope of the future, but also the power to live godly, holy lives today. This is the true grace Peter wrote about.

⁵⁰ Cp.1:22

⁵¹ Cp. 2:1.

⁵² Ibid Word Biblical Commentary, pg. 176

⁵³ Cp. 4:9

⁵⁴ Cp. 4:10-11.

⁵⁵ Cp. 5:5.