

1 Peter 1:9-16
A holy life

It seems to be getting harder, year on year, but I think I'm right in saying that I've managed to maintain the same waistline for the last 50 years. The only problem with that, really, is that it means, at the start of those 50 years, I was quite a chubby kid.

So I never liked the idea of learning judo. I had heard that the trick of that sport is to use your opponent's weight against them – which would have meant, I thought, that I would always have started with a distinct (or maybe I'd say *heavy*) disadvantage.

And I think that the world has played a similar trick on the church, over the years. What *should* be a strength is being presented as a weakness. So Paul exhorts Timothy:

Let no one despise you for your youth, but set the believers an example in speech, in conduct, in love, in faith, in purity.

(1 Timothy 4:12)

And in response the world bounces back the word Puritan. A pretty unfair rewriting of history, I suspect, but who would want to be called “Puritanical” nowadays?

50 years ago, maybe, someone a bit too enthusiastic about their faith might have been called a “holy Joe”. Nowadays if Christians are anything like insistent on the need for moral standards, they will most likely be vilified as “holier-than-thou”. Implication: any concern for holiness of life is self-righteous and judgemental. Rather than risk being labelled “holier than thou”, *chill*, guys, keep it under wraps, keep it to yourselves.

Maybe, we even start to feel, starting to swallow some of the world's propaganda ... is it *really* so very top-notch important? Isn't it really just a bit stupidly fussy to be so concerned about such scrupulous honesty? Are those little white lies really such a problem? Is it really such a big deal that you pay cash-in-hand to avoid the VAT? Of course you can't actually touch, but you can *look*, can't you? And who *wouldn't* envy the fantastic holidays of the rich and famous? We're only human, aren't we?

Maybe that is where the Gospel finds us. But we just need to take a moment today to remember that that is not where the Gospel *leaves* us. People can change – or, better to understand it as, *be* changed. See this wonderful word of hope from another of Paul's letters. Absolute clarity about sin, but sin that can be conquered by grace.

Or do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: neither the sexually immoral, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor men who practice homosexuality, nor thieves, nor the greedy, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God.

(1 Corinthians 6:9-10)

Are you ready for the most glorious past tense in the next sentence?

And such were some of you. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God.

(1 Corinthians 6:11)

So as we continue through this preview of the church covenant that we'll be bringing in next year, yes, there's a specific commitment to that theme of *holiness*. Not self-centred, self-congratulatory holier-than-thou-ness, but ... Uprightness. Goodness. Integrity. Honesty. Purity. Godliness. God-like-ness.

We will seek, by Divine aid, to live carefully in the world, denying ungodliness and worldly lusts, and remembering that, as we have been voluntarily buried by baptism and raised again from the symbolic grave, so there is on us a special obligation now to lead a new and holy life.

But rather than just flick it up on the screen this morning and then move on, I'd like us to spend a few more minutes thinking this through, and grounding it in the encouragements of proper contrast in the Scriptures, in 1 Peter 1.

After the usual introductions, Peter launches straight into excited praise of God.

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! According to his great mercy, he has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, ...

(1 Peter 1:3)

And what follows is quite a long and closely-reasoned but impassioned celebration of the eternal consequences of being a disciple of Jesus Christ. Picking it up a little later:

Though you have not seen him, you love him. Though you do not now see him, you believe in him and rejoice with joy that is inexpressible and filled with glory, obtaining the outcome of your faith, the salvation of your souls.

(1 Peter 1:8-9)

And then there's a little excursion picking up on that phrase "the salvation of your souls", when Peter insists that we human beings, if we are the recipients of God's saving grace, are the envy of not just OT believers, but even *angels*:

Concerning this salvation, ... things into which angels long to look.

(1 Peter 1:10,12)

And on account of all of this, these stacked-high promises of grace and hope and honour and privilege, Peter then continues to lay out the kind of response, the only fitting kind of response to all this glory. The response of glad, Christ-focused holiness in everyday life and conduct. It is obedience, yes, but it is glad and joy-filled obedience.

Therefore, preparing your minds for action, and being sober-minded, set your hope fully on the grace that will be brought to you at the revelation of Jesus Christ. As obedient children, do not be conformed to the passions of your former ignorance, ...

(1 Peter 1:13-14)

Holiness is a matter of mind-set as well as conduct

but, before finishing, I'd like to point out a couple of non-obvious, slight ambiguities in the words here that have challenged and encouraged me this week, too.

So we'll start in the most obvious place. Holiness is not just wishful thoughts and good intentions, but actual conduct.

■ **Holiness is a matter of mind-set as well as conduct**

You've got that there, both in the verb and the noun forms of the same word:

... but as he who called you is holy, you also be holy in all your conduct, ...
(1 Peter 1:15)

... conduct yourselves with fear throughout the time of your exile, ...
(1 Peter 1:17)

Now I'm pretty sure that none of you would really want to argue with that as a general statement, but the question is actually a very practical one. *What kind of* conduct? It is a question of being religious? It is about adopting a fancy way of behaving when you're in a church, things like bowing your head to pray? Is it saying grace before meals? It is putting a fish logo on your car? Is it sending out Christmas cards with Bible verses on, at five times the price?

Actually, I think that's more likely the more simplistic stuff that would have earned you that "holy Joe" label a few decades back. Can I just read a quote from that article I've put into the magazine this month, that tries to break it down into some very practical applications? Do go on and read the full article, too.

How do worriers learn to roll even their biggest cares onto God? How does pride turn to poverty of spirit, apathy to zeal for righteousness, stinginess to an open hand, restlessness to relentless calm?

"Will I obey God now, in this moment? Will I stop the fantasy right as it starts? Will I pray instead of checking my phone (again)? Will I refuse my eyes a second glance? Will I speak the loving, uncomfortable word?"

Folks, it's possible to err in both directions here. It is possible to think it is *only* a question of what you do, and that the attitude underneath doesn't really matter so much, because, as we do say at times, "Actions speak louder than words". And that way lies what they used to call "the social gospel" - which is pretty much *all* about what you do, irrespective of what you believe, social action, even lots of things that are actually good, but largely irrespective of any change in the heart within. And you can end up with no real distinction, no difference – no *holiness*, no separate-to-God-ness – from the unbeliever doing exactly the same alongside you.

But it's possible to slide the other way, too, and think that it's all a question of what you think and believe ... and that conduct doesn't really need to be considered or challenged. Whereas look, Peter actually uses a word that suggests this needs our serious attention

... conduct yourselves with fear throughout the time of your exile, ...
(1 Peter 1:17)

Like the school with Ofsted inspectors in, with a laser-like focus on knowing how to teach, but *showing* that they are putting all that theory into practice.

■ **Holiness is a matter of mind-set** as well as conduct

But all of what drives this has to come from something in the way of understanding, too. You can see that Peter uses reasoning in his writing. He addresses, even before it can be asked, any question of *why* this insistence on this kind of conduct? Here's one for starters, and what should be a high-scoring motivator, too.

No, it is *not* good enough for us to settle for sin, saying, *I'm only human*. Humanity is made in the image of God. And God's people are being *re-made* into the image of God.

Let us walk properly as in the daytime, not in orgies and drunkenness, not in sexual immorality and sensuality, not in quarrelling and jealousy. But put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires.

(Romans 13:13-14)

For as many of you as were baptised into Christ have put on Christ.

(Galatians 3:27)

To become more like Jesus Christ is your destiny, so it needs to become your objective, too. As Jesus Christ perfectly reveals the image of God, in holiness, Peter's arguing that it's just obvious and logical that we must seek to reflect that in our own lives too. Or, simply ...

... 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 1:15-16)

We simply have to consider that this is a *family* characteristic. The first thing my father-in-law said when he saw our David as a newborn was, *You're another Peter Ham, you are!* I think David has been trying to live that down ever since! But, in once sense, it should be increasingly said of us that *You're another Jesus Christ* ... in our conduct.

For those whom [God] foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn among many brothers.

(Romans 8:29)

And therefore, back in 1 Peter – though using a different Greek word, we have the same English word, with the thought being so similar:

As obedient children, do not be conformed to the passions of your former ignorance, ...

(1 Peter 1:14)

And notice how the understanding of what is going on is flagged up here in a couple of ways. What are we not to be conformed to? Not so much a way of thinking, but a way of being led by feelings, intense gut feelings, if you like: *passions*. But those passions are not greatly tied to fact or knowledge or reality: Peter calls them the passions of our former *ignorance*. We felt that way, and lived that way, because we did not *know* better. We did not *know* that we were designed for something far, far better than this world could ever offer us.

So what's the alternative to being conformed? Put on a different preposition:

Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.

(Romans 12:2)

It's so much about our mind-set underpinning what we do.

Therefore do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is.

(Ephesians 5:17)

Are our feelings about what is good or not, whether certain courses of actions are OK or not, based on the feelings that this world is trying to associate with them? It used to be that when a scene of seduction was about to take place on a TV programme, the saxophone used to start playing, trying to sell us the message that *Oh, this is so romantic!!* Ah swoon! Nowadays they use different instruments, but the message is the same. Not "this is sin", but this is so sweet, this is so *wonderful*. Do we get conned into being led by misled feelings, or do we *understand* what the will of the Lord is? Are we *transformed* by that understanding of what is true and right and "good and acceptable and perfect"?

Do you consciously use your thought process in support of this truth? Back to 1 Peter. Do we use our memories positively?

... conduct yourselves with fear throughout the time of your exile, knowing that you were ransomed from the futile ways inherited from your forefathers, ...

(1 Peter 1:17-18)

Do you use your *wills* – do you make choices – based on what God has said and what God has done? Look, three times in this opening verse of our passage, we are challenged as to our *mental* approach to these things:

Therefore, preparing your minds for action, and being sober-minded, set your hope fully on the grace that will be brought to you at the revelation of Jesus Christ.

(1 Peter 1:13)

Not that our minds are our God, of course. Peter says at the start and the finish of this section that it is the job of our minds to set our hearts upon Jesus Christ:

Therefore, preparing your minds for action, and being sober-minded, set your hope fully on the grace that will be brought to you at the revelation of Jesus Christ.

(1 Peter 1:13)

... you were ransomed from the futile ways inherited from your forefathers, not with perishable things such as silver or gold, but with the precious blood of Christ, like that of a lamb without blemish or spot.

(1 Peter 1:18-19)

That's where I want to set your hearts this morning. Not simply a renewed commitment to holiness, good though that would be. Not even a renewed understanding of holiness, good though that would be, too. But a renewed desire to know and worship and serve and love Jesus Christ. So that *he* will be your hope. So that *he* will be your delight. So that *he*, rather than mere holiness, would be increasingly precious to you.

So ***holiness is a matter of mind-set as well as conduct***. I hope you're with me on that. But let me just run a couple of minor puzzles, some teasing questions, past you before we finish. First, v14:

■ “do not be conformed” (14)

Here's the full verse in the ESV, which I use most of the time. But for once I've lined it up with the AV. Spot the difference.

As obedient children, do not be conformed to the passions of your former ignorance, ...

(1 Peter 1:14 ESV)

As obedient children, not fashioning yourselves according to the former lusts in your ignorance:

(1 Peter 1:14 AV)

Now both of those are good and sound translations of what Peter wrote, but what he wrote in Greek was a little bit ambiguous. Excuse a bit of technicality for a moment. The ESV translates this as a *passive* verb. That means that we're told not to let this conforming happen to ourselves. The source of this pressure isn't specified. We're just told to resist it, wherever or however it appears. In a sense, playing on that technical term “passive”, we're told to *not* be passive, to be *active* in resisting.

But I find the AV to be intriguingly challenging here. The Greek word that Peter uses *could* be, using that technical term, passive, or it could be – another technical term, the Greek “middle” – what you might think of in other languages as “reflexive”: the doer does the action upon themselves. See that key word in the AV there: *yourselves*.

Is that backward looking? Does it mean that back in the days when you and I operated in those “former lusts” of “ignorance”, we *fashioned ourselves* – aimed for, re-oriented ourselves – towards things that are unwholesome? That would fit. Yes, I could see that happening. We confirm ourselves in our worthless tastes and ambitions.

Or does it mean that we are told *now* to *not* fashion ourselves, orient ourselves, mould ourselves, towards those things that are unwholesome? Doesn't that suggest that it's not just outside pressures that we must fight against now, but *inward* ones?

Remember what they used to say our three enemies were, as Christians? The world, the flesh, and the Devil. The *world* – and the Devil, I guess – will seek from the *outside* to conform *us* to evil. The *flesh* will seek from the *inside* to conform *ourselves* to evil.

I'm sure that not many of you can think back to war time, but you'll at least have heard of the “Fifth Column” – infiltrators *within* the country waging war. And there are things still within *us* seeking to subvert us.

Remember what it *used* to be like, the day after Christmas. All those advertisements started on the TV for foreign holidays. You might argue that those advertisers shouldn't be allowed to make us discontented with our cold and dreary December lot. They should not try to make us conform to their false notions of what constitutes real happiness. And that may be so.

Or perhaps we should be a bit more discerning, and not try to pass the buck. Perhaps we need to realise that it is not all down to them out there and their carefully chosen screenshots. Perhaps we need to challenge ourselves about our own attitudes, so that we do not subvert ourselves by buying into the world's valuations of things.

There will undoubtedly be things to resist. There may also be things to repent of, and to turn from. Where the Holy Spirit has been at work refashioning us into the image of Christ, we may have been in practice undoing that work, still longing for what we should have now put behind us. Remember the stupidity of those recently-liberated people of Israel, longing for the “good old days” of captivity?

And the people of Israel also wept again and said, “Oh that we had meat to eat! We remember the fish we ate in Egypt that cost nothing, the cucumbers, the melons, the leeks, the onions, and the garlic. But now our strength is dried up, and there is nothing at all but this manna to look at.”

(Numbers 11:4-6)

Folks, are we consciously seeking to develop a taste for the bread of heaven? Or do we risk “fashioning ourselves” *backwards*?

■ **“you shall be” (16)**

... 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 1:15-16)

I just want to tease you, almost, with the question, *Is this a command, or is it a promise?* Think back to the good old days again, when everyone (at least we tell ourselves) knew the Ten Commandments. Did you ever hear, back in the early days of printing, of “The Devil's Bible”? An early printer lost his livelihood (lucky he didn't lose his head, actually, in those days!) because of a simple slip. Simple, but catastrophic. Here's the correct version, just so as we don't make any mistake here.

“Thou shalt not commit adultery.”

(Exodus 20:14)

Unfortunately, that printer managed to omit the word **NOT**. Oops! Mega-ooops!

But with it written the way it is there, which does mirror the Hebrew, now, very accurately, isn't there a bit of an ambiguity? Is this a command, or is it a promise? It's still the same in the ESV. They could have collapsed the ambiguity, and written “You must not”, or simply have written *Do not commit adultery*. But they didn't.

“You shall not commit adultery.”

(Exodus 20:14)

And I find that intriguing and actually rather encouraging and hopeful. It is not just up to us to screw up our eyes and resist. Actually, I'm not sure that we always do that anyway. We're probably quite similar to those people written to in Hebrews:

In your struggle against sin you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood.

(Hebrews 12:4)

For the most part, quite possibly, we may need to try harder. But it is still not absolutely down to just us. Those words of Peter

... 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 1:15-16)

I strongly suspect, are not just a command for us to obey – though they are that – but they're also a promise for us to rejoice in. It is God also stating that *he* is in on this. That *he* is committed to our becoming holy. That *he* has promised something that therefore he *will* deliver on. That, using Paul's words now,

I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ.

(Philippians 1:6)

Folks, we've been told here by Peter that

Holiness is a matter of mind-set as well as conduct

And he has called us to take this mind very seriously:

And if you call on him as Father who judges impartially according to each one's deeds, conduct yourselves with fear throughout the time of your exile, ...

(1 Peter 1:17)

Conduct ourselves with fear, yes. But also with faith. The two have to be balanced. We have to know this, too:

... knowing that you were ransomed from the futile ways inherited from your forefathers, not with perishable things such as silver or gold, but with the precious blood of Christ, like that of a lamb without blemish or spot.

(1 Peter 1:18-19)

Doesn't that bring hope? Is that precious blood going to prove to have been wasted?

He was foreknown before the foundation of the world but was made manifest in the last times for the sake of you who through him are believers in God, who raised him from the dead and gave him glory, so that your faith and hope are in God.

(1 Peter 1:20-21)

Folks, let's make sure that our hope today is not redirected ultimately to our own efforts to be holy, important though that is. Work on our resistance, yes. But worship our Redeemer.