

True Life and the Pursuit of Holiness

WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY

Last in a five-part series

July 26, 2015

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John 10:7–10 (CEB)

⁷ So Jesus spoke again, “I assure you that I am the gate of the sheep. ⁸ All who came before me were thieves and outlaws, but the sheep didn’t listen to them. ⁹ I am the gate. Whoever enters through me will be saved. They will come in and go out and find pasture. ¹⁰ The thief enters only to steal, kill, and destroy. I came so that they could have life—indeed, so that they could live life to the fullest.

Acts 4:1–12 (CEB)

While Peter and John were speaking to the people, the priests, the captain of the temple guard, and the Sadducees confronted them. ² They were incensed that the apostles were teaching the people and announcing that the resurrection of the dead was happening because of Jesus. ³ They seized Peter and John and put them in prison until the next day. (It was already evening.) ⁴ Many who heard the word became believers, and their number grew to about five thousand.

⁵ The next day the leaders, elders, and legal experts gathered in Jerusalem, ⁶ along with Annas the high priest, Caiaphas, John, Alexander, and others from the high priest’s family. ⁷ They had Peter and John brought before them and asked, “By what power or in what name did you do this?”

⁸ Then Peter, inspired by the Holy Spirit, answered, “Leaders of the people and elders, ⁹ are we being examined today because something good was done for a sick person, a good deed that healed him? ¹⁰ If so, then you and all the people of Israel need to know that this man stands healthy before you because of the name of Jesus Christ the Nazarene—whom you crucified but whom God raised from the dead. ¹¹ This Jesus is the stone you builders rejected; he has become the cornerstone! ¹² Salvation can be found in no one else. Throughout the whole world, no other name has been given among humans through which we must be saved.”

Romans 3:21–26, 5:1–11 (CEB)

²¹ But now God’s righteousness has been revealed apart from the Law, which is confirmed by the Law and the Prophets. ²² God’s righteousness comes through the faithfulness of Jesus Christ for all who have faith in him. There’s no distinction. ²³ All have sinned and fall short of God’s glory, ²⁴ but all are treated as righteous freely by his grace because of a ransom that was paid by Christ Jesus. ²⁵ Through his faithfulness, God displayed Jesus as the place of sacrifice where mercy is found by means of his blood. He did this to demonstrate his righteousness in passing over sins that happened before, ²⁶ during the time of God’s patient tolerance. He also did this to demonstrate that he is righteous in the present time, and to treat the one who has faith in Jesus as righteous. . . .

Therefore, since we have been made righteous through his faithfulness, we have peace with our God through Jesus Christ. ² We have access by faith into this grace in which we stand through him, and we boast in the hope of God’s glory. ³ But not only that! We even take pride in our problems, because we know that trouble produces endurance, ⁴ endurance produces character, and character produces hope. ⁵ This hope doesn’t put us to shame, because the love of God has been poured out in our hearts through the Holy Spirit, who has been given to us.

We are Americans, but God has called us to be not only free, but a holy people.

When I grew up in North Louisiana, “church” and “America” were practically synonyms. Everyone I knew was Christian, at least in name. Most of us went to church. All of us said the Pledge of Allegiance in school every day (without air conditioning for too many of those years). The cross was wrapped in the flag. The flag was draped around the cross. There was one culture and we all shared it. I’m not saying this was a good thing, because I’m not at all sure it was. I’m just saying that’s how it was.

And now, my how things have changed. Not only do we live in a vastly more diverse culture, but also, every new poll reveals the continued decline of religious belief in America, particularly Christianity. Fifty years ago there was a lot of social pressure to attend church; it was pretty much expected of everyone. If you were going to sell cars on Monday, you better have been in church on Sunday. Now, every adult in church on a Saturday evening or a Sunday morning is a volunteer . . . *And therein lies the power, indeed, the power of the Holy Spirit.*

Nearly fifteen years ago I read *Resident Alien* by Stanley Hauerwas and Will Willimon. The theme of their book was that Christianity's loss of the American culture would be a good thing. Becoming a community of genuine, committed "volunteers" rather than a church dominated by "cultural Christians" would strengthen not only the Church's faith, but our witness to the world. I think events are proving and will further prove that Hauerwas and Willimon got it right.

After all, why should we think that devout, committed Christians and "cultural" Christians would hold similar values or see the world in the same way? This goes even more so for the divide between Christians and non-Christians. There was a vast divide between the Christian communities in the first three centuries after Jesus and the pagan world in which they all lived, worshipped, worked, and died. The gulf was wide and the Jesus movement grew, in part, because many pagans saw in the Christians a life that they wanted for themselves and their children. Still, by AD 300, Christians probably made no more than ten percent of the population (6 million in a population of about 60 million).¹ Their influence greatly outweighed their numbers, so much so that in the late third-century there was the first empire-wide persecution of Christians. Only a few decades later the Roman Emperor Constantine became a Christian and began to make it the state religion, and thus began the history of "cultural" Christians.

In the face of declining cultural influence, many Christians seem to have become a bit combative. But the "war" to be fought is not to win the culture back, whatever that means, it is to become ever-truer disciples of Jesus. We are blessed to live in a land in which our freedom to exercise our religion is promised and guaranteed in our founding documents. The question for us is how we will use those freedoms, for what and to what end? What are you doing with your own life and why? How are you using the freedoms you enjoy?

What should we be doing? We could turn to many places in the New Testament, but I want to lift up two: one in Peter and one that we looked at recently, from James. In these two passages we learn much about who we are and the true life we live in Christ.

1 Peter 2:9–10 (NRSV)

⁹But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.

¹⁰Once you were not a people,
but now you are God's people;
once you had not received mercy,
but now you have received mercy.

James 1:22–25 (NRSV)

²²But be doers of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves. ²³For if any are hearers of the word and not doers, they are like those who look at themselves in a mirror; ²⁴for they look at themselves and, on going away, immediately forget what they were like. ²⁵But those who look into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and persevere, being not hearers who forget but doers who act—they will be blessed in their doing.

¹ Population estimates of the ancient world are notoriously difficult. These come from the historian of sociology, Rodney Stark, found in the first chapter of his book, *The Rise of Christianity*. It is a book I can highly recommend if you are interested.

We proclaim and we do. We tell others the Good News and serve those in need. We teach and we feed. We explain and we clothe. We love and then love some more. We do justice, we love faithfully, and we walk humbly with God (Micah 6:8).

This is the community that Luke depicts in his story of the first Christians in Jerusalem after Jesus' resurrection and the arrival of God's Holy Spirit. In Luke's story, spanning the second through the seventh chapter of Acts, he enables us to grasp that the Christians gathered to pray, to share meals, to care for one another, and simply do life together, as we'd put it now. The apostles boldly proclaimed the Good News to everyone who would listen, even though they soon faced arrest, imprisonment, and worse. They also ensured that the daily needs of all were met, that food and shelter was found even for the poorest among them. Believers sold property and used the proceeds to pay for this. The apostles soon found that they had to delegate responsibilities to others in the community as it grew. James would say that they were all doers of the word. Not surprisingly, James, Jesus' half-brother, eventually became the leader in this community until he was executed in AD 63.

My point is that we don't have to see their life together as a lot different from our own. They proclaimed the Good News with boldness and they cared for those who lacked even the basics necessities of life. They didn't view it as their job to change the world or to save souls. That was God's work. Their part was to "proclaim the mighty acts" of the one who had called them out of darkness *and* to be doers of the word, in ways both large and small.

Yes – a holy people called out of the darkness for a purpose

There's a lot swirling around our churches right now: challenges to religious freedom, the definition of marriage, turmoil on the world scene, and unspeakable violence in some of our largest cities. So, let's take a closer look at the passage from Peter.

Peter writes to Christians who feel like aliens and exiles in their own lands. Echoing God's word brought by Moses, Peter encourages them by reminding them of their place among God's people. Like the ancient Israelites, these Christians *are* a "royal priesthood" and a "holy nation"² upon whom worldly power and holy purpose converge. They have been called out of the darkness for a reason, a purpose. Peter states this purpose simply. Why has God formed us into his people? So that we may "proclaim God's mighty acts." This is the *end* to which we have been called. So that we might proclaim to others, in what we say and what we do, God's mighty acts of salvation. To reiterate, God doesn't place on us the responsibility of "saving souls" or building his kingdom. That is his work. We are simply to proclaim.

Now . . . lest we think this proclaiming is all about speech, remember what I'm sure your Mom told you: actions speak louder than words. And if no one told you, you've discovered it for yourself. What we do in our interactions with others is a witness to Christ, especially if the person knows that we are a self-professed Christian. We might wish that the practice of our faith weren't always on display, but that is just how it is. Thus, Peter is right when he tells the Christians later in this letter, "Conduct yourselves honorably among the Gentiles, so that, though they malign you as evildoers, they may see your honorable deeds . . ." (1 Peter 3:16).

And what kind of people does it take to proclaim God's mighty acts . . . to handle this convergence of worldly power and holy purpose . . . to build *for* God's kingdom?

Only a few verses before today's passage, Peter tells the Christians that they are to rid themselves of all malice and pretense, envy and hurtful talk. Like babies at their mothers' breasts, these Christians are to drink the milk of God's kindness so that they might grow to maturity and wholeness, having received a foretaste of God's full mercy. Peter urges them to be like "living stones" built into a spiritual house, a house of

² The word translated "nation" here refers to a people, in this case God's people, not a nation-state like the U.S. or any other.

strength that rests upon Jesus Christ, the cornerstone and foundation of this house. Peter writes, “Therefore, prepare your minds for action; discipline yourselves; set all your hope on the grace that Jesus Christ will bring you . . . love one another deeply from the heart” (1:13, 22). Later in the letter Peter writes, “Like good stewards of the manifold grace of God, serve one another with whatever gift each of you has received . . . whoever serves must do so with the strength that God supplies . . .” (4:10-11).

In much of his letter, Peter paints a picture of a people, God’s people, who can do the work of the kingdom, who can “proclaim God’s mighty acts.” Christians are to be unified and disciplined. We are to love one another. We are to serve one another. Peter reminds us that we are to be agreeable, sympathetic, and humble. We are not to retaliate when wronged.

When we live in this way, when we take care of those in need, when we boldly tell others the Good News . . . in all this, we are witnesses to God’s grace and the saving power of the gospel. As United Methodists, we earnestly seek to tell the Good News, to bear the fruit of God’s Spirit every day, and to care for all those who need help with even the basics of life.

This is why we are United Methodists.

The Pursuit of Holiness

In week two of this series, we learned that the “pursuit of happiness” phrase in the Declaration of Independence speaks to our God-given and unalienable right to a pursue the truly good life, the virtuous life, to undertake with all our energies the “vocation of the virtues.” We Christians put a finer point on this. We pursue holiness, the deepest and truest expression of the virtues. We strive to be people who put into practice every day our love of God and others. When we fail, we get up and press ahead, knowing that the Spirit of Christ is with us, empowering us and strengthening us. Most importantly, we know that we need more than life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness – we need a Savior.

The following is from a recent article in *Christianity Today*:³

How Dante Can Save Your Life is, in effect, a sequel to Dreher’s 2013 best-selling memoir, *The Little Way of Ruthie Leming*. In that book, he narrated the marvelous life and crushing death, from cancer, of his schoolteacher sister. Unlike most tales of lives that end too soon, Ruthie’s story stood apart. It taught Dreher that he was wrong to regard his small-town upbringing as benighted and constricting; that he had been wrong to flee it for the bright lights and high times of big cities.

For the first time, Dreher discerned what a hard-driving, large-salaried, ambitious life of urban success couldn’t provide. It couldn’t offer what the local folks of Starhope, Louisiana, gave the Dreher family during Ruthie’s passage to death. Dreher’s mother and father had exhibited splendid moral and religious strength as they lost their daughter. In turn, they received unstinting care from the Starhope community, especially its church people.

The evangelical physician who had attended to Ruthie spoke stunning truth when Dreher asked him to declare the significance of her life and death:

He had rocked in his chair for a few seconds. “That the American dream is a lie,” he said at last. “The pursuit of happiness doesn’t create happiness. You can’t work hard enough to defeat cancer. You can’t make enough money to save your own life. When you understand that life is really about understanding what our true condition is—how much we need other people, and need a Savior—then you’ll be wise.

³ By Ralph C. Wood, “How Dante’s Poetry Saved Rod Dreher from Despair,” *Christianity Today*, July 2, 2015

From “Strangers in a Strange Land”

An excerpt from the Erasmus Lecture 2104 by Charles J. Caput, Roman Catholic Archbishop of Philadelphia. The whole lecture is available at firstthings.com, the January 2015 issue, available in the past issues archive.

The legitimacy of *liberal democracy* depends on its ability to give its people security and freedom—with “freedom” increasingly defined as a maximum number of choices within each person’s private zone of control. The goal of *modern technology* is to subdue the natural world, to put it at the service of society in general and individual consumers in particular. So modern democracy isn’t just “allied” with modern technology; it depends on it. The two can’t be separated.

Here’s where the trouble comes in. As the progress of democracy and the progress of technology go hand in hand, the influence of polling, focus groups, and market research grows. As a result, the state takes on a market model that requires the growth of government as a service provider. Short-term needs and wants begin to displace long-term reflection and planning. In effect, democracy becomes an expression of consumer preference. It has plenty of room for personal “values,” but it has very little space for common meaning, classic virtue, or shared purpose.

I think Ross Douthat’s excellent book *Bad Religion* confirms this. Douthat argues that we’ve always been a nation of heretics. Today is no exception. Most people who leave Christianity or Judaism don’t really become atheists. They find some other spirituality or self-improvement program to fill the need for purpose. And private belief—unlike communities of faith—fits very comfortably in a consumer democracy. Leviathan doesn’t care if you see Jesus in your grilled cheese sandwich—unless you suggest that other people should see him, too.

As I look back on the last sixty years, one of the Scripture passages that stays with me most vividly is Judges 2:6–15. It’s the story of what happens *after* the Exodus and *after* Joshua wins the Promised Land for God’s people. Verse 10 says that Joshua “and all that generation also were gathered to their fathers; and there arose another generation after them, who did not know the Lord or the work which he had done for Israel.”

It’s worth reading. So is the research Christian Smith has done on the religious beliefs of American teens and young adults. Every generation leaves a legacy of achievement and failure. In my lifetime, I’ve had the privilege of knowing many good men and women of my generation—Christians, Jews, and people with no religious faith at all; people who have made the world better by the gift of their lives and their joy in service to others. But the biggest failure, the biggest sadness, of so many people of my generation, including parents, educators, and leaders in the Church, is our failure to pass along our faith in a compelling way to the generation now taking our place.

We can blame this on the confusion of the times. We can blame it on our own mistakes in pedagogy. But the real reason faith doesn’t matter to so many of our young adults and teens is that—too often—it *didn’t really matter to us*. Not enough to shape our lives. Not enough for us to suffer for it.

I know there are tens of thousands of exceptions to this, but it is still true. A man can’t give what he doesn’t have. If we want to change the culture of a nation, we need to begin by taking a hard look at the thing we call our own faith. If we don’t radiate the love of God with passion and courage in the example of our daily lives, nobody else will—least of all the young people who see us most clearly and know us most intimately. The theme of this essay is “strangers in a strange land.” But the real problem in America today isn’t that we believers are foreigners. It’s that our children and grandchildren *aren’t*. . . .

Each of our lives matters. Our journey does not end in the grave. What we do has consequences for our own eternity and those around us. Our lives gathered together as communities of faith and as a nation shape the conscience and the future of the “city upon a hill” that John Winthrop imagined and that we have inherited.

We were made by God to receive love ourselves and to show love to others—love anchored in the truth about the human person and the nature of human relationships. That’s our purpose. That’s why we were created. We’re here to bear each other’s burdens, to sacrifice ourselves for the needs of others, and to live a witness of love for the God who made us—not only in our personal lives, but in all our public actions, -including every one of our social, economic, and political choices.

And if that makes us strangers in a strange land, then we should praise God for the privilege.

