

The Discipline of Holy Faithfulness

WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY

2nd in a four-part series

November 2, 2014

©2014 Scott L. Engle

Leviticus 11:44–45 (Common English Bible)

⁴⁴I am the LORD your God. You must keep yourselves holy and be holy, because I am holy. You must not make yourselves unclean by any swarming creature that crawls on the ground. ⁴⁵I am the LORD, who brought you up from the land of Egypt to be your God. You must be holy, because I am holy.

1 Peter 1:13–25 (CEB)

¹³Therefore, once you have your minds ready for action and you are thinking clearly, place your hope completely on the grace that will be brought to you when Jesus Christ is revealed. ¹⁴Don't be conformed to your former desires, those that shaped you when you were ignorant. But, as obedient children, ¹⁵you must be holy in every aspect of your lives, just as the one who called you is holy. ¹⁶It is written, You will be holy, because I am holy. ¹⁷Since you call upon a Father who judges all people according to their actions without favoritism, you should conduct yourselves with reverence during the time of your dwelling in a strange land. ¹⁸Live in this way, knowing that you were not liberated by perishable things like silver or gold from the empty lifestyle you inherited from your ancestors. ¹⁹Instead, you were liberated by the precious blood of Christ, like that of a flawless, spotless lamb. ²⁰Christ was chosen before the creation of the world, but was only revealed at the end of time. This was done for you, ²¹who through Christ are faithful to the God who raised him from the dead and gave him glory. So now, your faith and hope should rest in God.

²²As you set yourselves apart by your obedience to the truth so that you might have genuine affection for your fellow believers, love each other deeply and earnestly. ²³Do this because you have been given new birth—not from the type of seed that decays but from seed that doesn't. This seed is God's life-giving and enduring word.

²⁴Thus,

All human life on the earth is like grass,
and all human glory
is like a flower in a field.

The grass dries up and its flower falls off,
²⁵but the Lord's word endures forever.

This is the word that was proclaimed to you as good news.

It is doesn't take too many years for us to learn that if we are going to become proficient at anything, it will take some discipline, some training. But how often do we apply that knowledge to our growth in Christ?

Last week, we learned that 1 Peter is a letter written by the apostle to Christians suffering in diverse ways for their allegiance to Jesus. Not surprisingly, Peter begins the letter by reminding these believers that their anchor is Jesus, he is their "living hope." In Jesus, Peter writes, the suffering believers have "an inheritance that is imperishable . . . [and] are being protected by the power of God through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time" (1:4-5). This beginning, focusing on the hope that is Jesus, makes sense. As Charles Stokes once said in a sermon, "Jesus Lives: So Does Hope."

But then, Peter takes a turn that isn't nearly so obvious. He is writing to encourage and comfort suffering believers and, yet, turns immediately from the hope that is Jesus to a call for discipline, faithfulness, and holy living. We wonder, how exactly is that comforting or encouraging? Why does Peter put hope and holiness together?

Holy?

In her commentary on 1 Peter, Pheme Perkins acknowledges many Christians' discomfort when we begin talking about holiness:

“Many Christians find the injunction to ‘be holy as God is holy’ objectionable. After all, we are fragile human beings in need of God’s forgiveness, not saints. Matthew’s version [in the Sermon on the Mount: ‘be perfect as your Father in heaven is perfect’], which uses the word ‘perfection,’ is even more offensive to those who have grown up with a sense of being unable to fulfill the expectations of a demanding parent. When asked why they felt so angry that such statements were in the Bible, a group of adult parishioners quickly identified the tensions they could not resolve in their lives: (a) mothers who have to work, struggling to meet all the claims on their time; (b) fathers whose careers have been sidetracked in the economic downturn; (c) parents whose adult children are in various sorts of difficulty, and the like. Life is just too tough to have God requiring perfection, they insisted. No doubt 1 Peter’s audience could come up with a list of hardships to justify such a conclusion. The letter seeks to encourage them not to slide away from the new life they had adopted as Christians. In today’s terms, when the list of obligations and demands on our time seems impossible to manage, God is often the first to go.¹”

The first to go

I think that Dr. Perkins may help us to answer our question: What does holiness have to do with hope?

Growing in holiness is no less and no more than growing in Christlikeness, having the “mind of Christ” (Philippians 2:5), walking as Jesus walked (1 John 2:6) . . . simply loving God and loving neighbor everyday and in every way.

Ask yourself this: How well would Jesus be weathering the storms of our lives? Would he be as anxious and fearful as we often are? I think not. What I’d like to be is more like Jesus! Yet, the pressures and anxieties that threaten to drive God from our lives, to squeeze out our commitments to the habits of Christlikeness, can only be pushed aside, as Peter puts it by, disciplining ourselves and setting all our hope on the grace of Jesus Christ. The world wants to force us into its ways of excess and panic, but we are not to allow ourselves to be conformed to such ways. Instead, we need to make a newly

The Holiness of God

Holy is one of those Bible/church words that I suspect most of us use without ever being sure exactly what we mean. The truth is that even theologians struggle to convey the breadth and depth of its meaning.

In the simplest sense, holiness is what makes God, God – and makes us not God! Gerhard Vos writes, “He is holy in everything that characterizes Him and reveals Him, holy in His goodness and grace, no less in His righteousness and wrath.” Aulen writes, “Holiness is the foundation on which the whole conception of God rests. . . Every statement about God, whether in reference to his love, power, righteousness . . . ceases to be an affirmation about God when it is not projected against the background of his holiness.”

In other words, God’s righteousness is his *holy* righteousness. His mercy is *holy* mercy. God’s wrath is his *holy* wrath. But even this still doesn’t get us very close to what we mean by holy.

Allen Coppedge helps us to see that just as it takes many differing portraits to adequately portray God (say, Good Shepherd and Loving Father, to name two), so it takes several ideas to try to capture what we mean by God’s holiness. Coppedge suggests that holiness has six major components: separation, brilliance, righteousness, love, power, and goodness. I find this to be as good a working list as any. For example, the biblical portrait of God as creator tends to emphasize the separateness of God as a key aspect of his holiness, while the portrait of God as a shepherd emphasizes holiness as goodness.

Through it all, we need to remember that God is holy (Lev 11:45; 1 Peter 1:15-16) and the holiness of any creature, such as you or me, or any place, or any building is derived from God. Our own holiness (in which we are to grow!) has meaning only in relationship to God!

¹Perkins, P. (1995). *First and Second Peter, James, and Jude*. Interpretation, a Bible commentary for teaching and preaching (37). Louisville, KY: John Knox Press.

energized commitment to putting God first and learning the ways of disciples. In other words, we have to learn the discipline that characterizes a disciple.

What's a disciple?

We toss the word “disciple” around a lot. Jesus charged his disciples with making more disciples. The stated mission of the UMC is “to make disciples of Jesus Christ.” But what does “disciple” really mean? To call someone a “follower” of Jesus doesn't really get to the heart of it. Even “believer” doesn't convey the full sense of “disciple.” “Disciple” translates the Greek word, *mathetes*, and it is all about learning. *Mathetes* might be translated “learner,” “pupil,” or “student.” Disciples sit at the feet of the teacher so that they can learn. What do they learn? They learn to be like the teacher, the master. I prefer the word “apprentice” as a synonym for “disciple.” “Apprentice” conveys the full sense of learning to become like our master, Jesus. Apprentice plumbers seek to become master plumbers by discipling themselves so that they might learn the master's trade. Similarly, disciples of Jesus are apprentices seeking to become Christ-like.

How do we learn?

How does a child learn to stay away from a hot stove? Mother's instruction might work . . . or not. But, certainly, if the child touches the hot stove, he'll learn quickly not to do it again. Much of what we learn, and often the most important things we learn, we learn by experience. And learning by experience is a process. The child observes the stove, touches it and assesses the result (ouch!), designs a new approach to dealing with hot stoves (stay away!), and then implements what he learned. It is a circle of learning, a nearly infinitely repeated process that makes us who we are. In a letter to Timothy, Paul wrote about Scripture's unending cycle of teaching. Scripture not only teaches us (shows us the way forward), it rebukes us (points out when we've messed up), corrects us (shows us how to get back on the path), and trains us in righteousness (shows us how to do a better job of staying on the path) (2 Tim. 3:16).

In *The Divine Conspiracy*, Dallas Willard helps us to see that this training is not about so much about doing as it is about being. Our goal is to *be* evermore Christlike. In our training and our trying, our aim is not just to control our behavior, but to be transformed. My goal is to *be* a patient person, not just to behave patiently. We want to *be* joyful. We want to *be* faithful. We want to *be* kind. It is transformation we seek, not merely better performance. We can never live Sermon-on-the-Mount lives by reducing Jesus' teachings to a list of rules. The life we seek is a transformed life; we need a metamorphosis.

As we grow in Christlikeness, we are becoming the persons God created us to be. Spiritual disciplines are practices that change the inner-self, that help us toward the inner transformation of heart and soul. Thus, these disciplines are the training tools that Christians have found to be necessary: the disciplines of celebration, prayer, Bible study, servanthood, confession, and more. There are many different lists of disciplines, but they all share a commitment to training for God's kingdom, not merely striving. They are the practices that create the life we seek.

Exiles in a foreign land

Peter helps us to remember who we are, i.e., into whom God has made us. We have been “born anew . . . through the loving and enduring word of God” (v. 23). And the truth is that we do live as “exiles” (v. 17) in this world. We know that we are to be the light of the world, the city on the hill (Matthew 5:14), yet we are more than a bit like strangers in a strange land. Becoming more like Jesus necessarily means that we will fit less well into a world that does not know him.

Peter, like the rest of the New Testament writers, wants us to grasp the larger vision of God's work in this world and our place in his work. Disciplined and holy living are how we can live the glorious new life God has given us, how we can truly be evermore

Christlike. It is how we learn to be faithful; even better . . . how we become faithful to the God who loves us.

Our giving is part and parcel of our faithfulness. We often want to think of our money as somehow separate from the rest of our lives in Christ, but nothing could be further from the truth. Those things in our lives that are most important to us are the very things that we must entrust to God – our money, our time, our families. We are to let God's shine light most brightly on that which truly matters to us.

In it together

Of course, such living doesn't come naturally to us. The ways of the world are seductive. The heightened pressures of these times can actually, as Perkins reminds, force us away from God. But Peter reminds us that in this, we are not alone. It is within a community of fellow believers that we strive to be holy as God is holy, to be faithful as God is faithful, knowing that the practice of our faith is a bulwark against despair and fear.

Peter calls us to "genuine mutual love" in which we "love one another deeply from the heart" (v. 22). Tough times come and go. Our lives are a chaotic and sometimes bewildering combination of tragedies and joys, of enthusiasms and boredoms. But quoting from Isaiah, Peter writes: "The grass withers and flower falls, but the word of the Lord endures forever" (v. 24-25 from Isaiah 40:6-8).

And the word of God is a word of love. Before all else, God *is* love. When we are struggling through difficulties of any sort, preparing our minds for action (1:13) means living God's future now, a future without fear or tragedy, a future in which we simply love God and love neighbor every day and in every way, for that is truly holy living.

Appreciating Leviticus

Leviticus is one of the Old Testament books that Christians too often believe is irrelevant and even off-putting. Yet, I've found that the longer I've been immersed in the New Testament message, the more I've come to appreciate Leviticus. It helps to always remember that Jesus' commandment, "Love your neighbor" is a quote from Leviticus 19.

Rob Bell, one of America's most popular young preachers, tells the story of his 1999 church planting, which has since grown to be a "mega-church." For the entire first year, he preached through Leviticus, verse by verse. Why? He writes, "Leviticus cannot be tamed. Its imagery is too wild. We ventured into its lair and let it devour us, trusting that God would deliver us with a truer picture of his Son." That is one brave preacher.

Do we approach the book with such confidence? Perhaps the following brief observations will strengthen our resolve to be a people of *all* the Bible.

The theme of Leviticus is expressed in 20:26, "You are to be holy to me because, I, the Lord, am holy, and I have set you apart from the nations to be my own." To speak of God as holy is to refer to (1) God's *separation* from his creation and (2) God's *moral* character.

The first part of Leviticus (chapters 1-16) speaks to the gulf, the separation, between God and humanity. How can an unholy people approach a holy God? As Kaiser writes, "A holy God graciously provides these rituals to make it possible for mere mortals, who are also sinners, to walk in fellowship with one who is pure." The rituals are foreign to us. They seem distasteful and even bizarre. But it is important to appreciate that such rituals were commonplace among the religions of the ancient Near East. God taught them about holiness using words and rituals that they could understand.

The second half of Leviticus (chapters 17-26) focuses on moral character. Our character is to reflect God's character. Every thought, word, and deed that makes up our lives are to be grounded in mercy, kindness, and grace. It surprises people to discover that when Jesus says "You shall love your neighbor as yourself" (see Matthew 22:34-40), he is quoting from Leviticus 19:18.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. In his call to holy living in the face of suffering, Peter urges the believers to contrast two ways of living: the ways of the world and the ways of God. The one is perishable; the other imperishable. How can living in the ways of God, this “holy living” be the path to hope and confidence and away from fear and anxiety. What does how we live really have to do with how we feel?
2. The last verse of the chapter reads: “That word [the word of the Lord] is the good news that was announced to you.” David Bartlett² rightly notes that the entire letter holds Christian proclamation, which is the essence of preaching, in “high esteem.” Do you agree that the essence of Christian preaching is the announcement of the good news? What do you think constitutes good preaching? If you could give preachers three pieces of advice what would you say. Of course, you might be doing so on a regular basis already!
3. John Ortberg writes that a “disciplined person” is “someone who can do the right thing at the right time in the right way and with the right spirit.” Do you consider yourself to be a disciplined person? How would your own definition differ from Ortberg’s? What is missing from the definition? How about rigid and organized? What is the danger in thinking about “disciplined” in that way

Daily Bible Readings

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

<p>Monday, Leviticus 19 “Love your neighbor” is found in this chapter. What themes do you find when reading the whole chapter? Don’t allow yourself to be put off by the foreignness of some of this. What messages are there for you here?</p>	<p>Tuesday, Isaiah 40 This prophet is certainly a bringer of good news to an exiled people. Again, what message do you hear for yourself in this ancient writing?</p>
<p>Wednesday, 2 Timothy 1:6-14 Paul too issues a call for holy living in the midst of his own suffering.</p>	<p>Thursday, 1 John 3:11-23 Living a life of love. More on what such a life looks like.</p>
<p>Friday, 2 Peter 1:5-8 More on disciplined living. Read all the first chapter and you’ll probably agree that how we live really does matter!</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">Weekly Prayer Concerns</p>

²Bartlett’s commentary on 1 Peter is in the *New Interpreters Bible*, a copy of which is in the St. Andrew library. Pheme Perkins’ commentary is in the library as well.

