

See That No One Is like Esau

See that no one is sexually immoral or godless like Esau, who for a single meal sold his inheritance rights as the oldest son. Afterward, as you know, when he wanted to inherit this blessing, he was rejected. He could bring about no change of mind, though he sought the blessing with tears. - Hebrews 12:16-17

Esau was a bad example. He sold his most valuable possession—the birthright as the oldest son—to his brother Jacob for the satisfaction of one meal (see Genesis 25:29-34). His error came because he could not delay gratifying his appetites. His flesh told him he couldn't do without the stew that Jacob had made—that he had to have it or he would die. He gave up his inheritance because he couldn't curb his appetite for a single meal. A second and greater reason for his poor judgment was the fact that he did not consider the value of his inheritance. He didn't stop to think about what he was giving up. He *despised his birthright* (Gen 25:34) by selling it so cheap.

Years ago I counseled a married man in our church who was beginning a romantic relationship with another woman. I told him not to be like Esau—that if he progressed further in the relationship he would be despising his godly inheritance and selling it for what would amount to a mess of pottage. He agreed and broke off the relationship.

We are told not to be like Esau. Our inheritance, the kingdom of God and all its benefits, is not worth selling at any price. Jesus taught us that his kingdom was like a man who found a treasure in a field who joyfully sold everything he had to buy the field in order to possess the treasure (see Matthew 13:44). Moses gave up the pleasures of the royal courts of Egypt in order to be mistreated with the people of God because he was looking ahead to a greater reward (see Hebrews 11:24-26). Paul counted all things as *rubbish* for the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ (see Philippians 3:7-8). We have *an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade—kept in heaven* (1 Pet 1:4). This inheritance didn't come cheap. We need to treasure it; and if we do, it is not likely that we will be anything at all like Esau.

If Esau could stand before us today he would tell us not to make the same mistake he did. With the same tears that he shed when he tried in vain to regain his inheritance he would tell us about his regrets. Don't be like Esau. Don't do anything for temporary pleasure that could jeopardize what has been graciously given to you from above for this life and the next. It's not worth it.

He didn't stop to think about what he was giving up

Obey Them So That Their Work Will Be a Joy

Obey your leaders and submit to their authority. They keep watch over you as men who must give an account. Obey them so that their work will be a joy, not a burden, for that would be of no advantage to you. -Hebrews 13:7

Typically, pastors shy away from writing or preaching on Hebrews 13:7 for fear of being self-serving. A pastor who tells the church, "*Obey your leaders and submit to their authority,*" may be likened, by some, to a pastor who announces that, "October is 'Pastor Appreciation Month.'" But if the people in any church don't have a heart to submit to their shepherds, there may be joy in Mudville—but not in that church.

Out of context, the statement "*obey your leaders*" could be interpreted broadly to encompass obedience to all those in authority, including governmental authorities in society at large. But the context suggests that the writer of Hebrews is speaking about the leaders in the church—the pastors. The primary function of a shepherd (the more common New Testament word is overseer) is to *keep watch*. Paul said to the elders of the church at Ephesus, "*Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers. Be shepherds of the church of God*" (Acts 20:28).

How many pastors find their work a burden?

It is evident that the people of God are being exhorted here to obey and submit to their pastors. These shepherds not only *keep watch*, they keep watch as those *who must give an account*. As such, their motives are to be trusted for the decisions they make. But if the people they are shepherding are ornery, difficult and rebellious, their ministry is turned from a joy to a burden—and no one benefits from that.

This leads me to a question which points to a scandal in the church. How many pastors find their work a burden? Far, far too many. In most cases, that burden can be attributed directly to disobedience and insubordination within the ranks of the church. Unfortunately, much of that struggle can be linked to non-biblical forms of church government that allow for insubordination. But just as parents know the joy of parenting when their children obey and the burden it can become when there is ongoing disobedience, pastors can find their ministry either a joy or a burden. We know that no pastor (or parent) is perfect, but what advantage is it to the sheep that the shepherds would see their work as burden and not a joy?

I am currently finding more joy in the ministry of shepherding the church of God than ever before. I also have never experienced such a willingness in the people of God to respect and submit to authority in the church. Coincidence?

A Double-Minded Man

When he asks, he must believe and not doubt, because he who doubts is like a wave of the sea, blown and tossed by the wind. That man should not think he will receive anything from the Lord; he is a double-minded man, unstable in all he does. -James 1:6-8

Having two of the same thing can often be advantageous. A double-portion, a double-decker, and a double-barrel can produce twice the blessing or effectiveness. But there are other examples where having double is not a blessing but a curse. Consider the double standard, double talk or a double-cross. So it is with being double-minded because *a double-minded man is unstable in all he does*.

James, an apostle and the blood brother of Jesus, encourages any who lack wisdom to ask God *who gives generously to all without finding fault* (1:5). But he says that those who ask should not be double-minded about it. They *must believe and not doubt, because he who doubts is like a wave of the sea, blown and tossed by the wind. That man should not think he will receive anything from the Lord*. Why? Because he is double-minded.

He will not have half-hearted and double-minded disciples

Single-mindedness is a virtue. Double-mindedness is an affliction. In the context of what James is saying, double-mindedness (Greek: dipsuchos: Literally: Two minds) is faith and doubt mixed. But faith and doubt do not mix. Either faith overcomes doubt or doubt spoils faith. You can't have both and expect to stand strong in the favour of God.

The children of Israel were plagued with this double-mindedness. One day they were serving the Lord. The next day they were serving Baal. But you can't serve two masters (see Matthew 6:24). It is not right that *out of the same mouth come praise and cursing* (Ja 3:10). Trying to be hot and cold at the same time makes you what? That's right—lukewarm. And we know how the Lord feels about those who are lukewarm.

So, why should we be surprised or disappointed at not receiving from the Lord what we would like when we are double-minded? The Lord is more than generous and gives to those who come to him in faith. But in order to do that we cannot live with one foot in the kingdom and another in the world. Life in Jesus is an all or nothing proposition. He will not have half-hearted and double-minded disciples.

So may you always receive a double-portion of blessing from the Lord. But you'll never get it being double-minded.

Man's Anger

Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry, for man's anger does not bring about the righteous life that God desires. -James 1:19-20

Someone whom I know to be a very good mom told me about a recent interaction with her three-year-old son. After disciplining him in her anger she sat him down and said, "Now, do you know why Mommy spanked you?" "Yea, because you were mad," he replied. "At that point," she told me, "I knew that he had gotten the wrong message and my discipline did not have a positive effect." The mistake she made was not that she spanked her son, but that she did it in her anger, *for man's anger does not bring about the righteous life that God desires*.

Man's anger and God's anger are two different things. Jesus was angry on more than one occasion. He was angry at the stubborn hearts of the religious legalists (see Mark 3:5) and at the blatant disregard that the temple merchants had for God's temple as a house of prayer (see Mark 11 and John 2). Righteous indignation is not only allowable, it is often imperative. But corrupted human anger is never helpful. It could never bring about the righteous life that God requires. History and experience teaches us that man's anger has been responsible in innumerable ways for untold harm to millions of lives.

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Personal anger is a strong motivating force. The best boxers, they say, have that "killer instinct." It is no coincidence that most boxers are angry people. And consider revenge. People have spent their entire lives trying to satisfy their anger through revenge. Do you think human revenge can exact righteous justice? It is not necessarily wrong to become angry. It is how we deal with the anger that matters. Most problems come when we are "quick-tempered." The Scriptures describe God as *gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and rich in love* (Ps 145:8). And James gives such practical advice when he says that we *should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry*.

Anger can be good. We need to become angry about some things. But anger that is rooted solely in human emotion will not establish the righteousness that God requires. That anger is corrupt because it is selfish. Righteous anger is never selfish but always runs parallel to truth, justice and love. So be angry if the anger comes from the heart of God and serves his purposes. But if it is of human origin—deal with it and move on; it serves as a benefit to no one.

Don't Show Favoritism

Don't show favoritism. Suppose a man comes into your meeting wearing a gold ring and fine clothes, and a poor man in shabby clothes also comes in. If you show special attention to the man wearing fine clothes...have you not discriminated among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts? -James 2:1-4

In the world, money is privilege. But in the church, brotherhood is privilege and favoritism in any form does not belong.

James gives us a classic, yet so very current, illustration of how favoritism may be displayed in the church. He says, “*Suppose a man comes into your meeting wearing a gold ring and fine clothes, and a poor man in shabby clothes also comes in.*” Can you picture it? Of course you can. If you have been in the church for any length of time, you have actually seen it. How your particular fellowship has dealt with it is another matter—but we have all experienced the irony of the rich and the poor showing up at our doors coincidentally. Granted, the poor show up at our doors in greater numbers, but that is to be expected because where else are they going to find a place of acceptance after being rejected in the world? And besides, *has not God chosen those who are poor in the eyes of the world to be rich in faith and to inherit the kingdom* (v5)?

In the world, money is privilege. In the church, brotherhood is privilege.

James continues with his illustration, saying, “*If you show special attention to the man wearing fine clothes and say, ‘Here’s a good seat for you,’ but say to the poor man, ‘You stand there’ or ‘Sit on the floor by my feet,’ have you not discriminated among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts*” (vs 3-4)? He goes on to say, “*If you show favoritism, you sin*” (v9). Favoritism is not right. Why? The American Declaration of Independence says it well: “We hold these truths to be self-evident that all men are created equal.” Moreover, there is a principle for the church that says, *God has combined the members of the body and has given greater honor to the parts that lacked it, so that there should be no division in the body, but that its parts should have equal concern for each other* (1 Co 12:24-25). “Equal concern for each other” is the mandate of the church. We decimate this mandate and we have *insulted the poor* (v6) when we show favoritism. With that being said, we must be careful not to discriminate against the rich and give them the impression that there is no place for them in the church. Yes, it does happen. We can be intimidated by the rich and make them feel unwelcome.

If God, who is above all, *is no respecter of persons* (Acts 10:34 KJV), how can we justify favoritism of any kind?

A Person Is Justified by What He Does and Not by Faith Alone

You see that a person is justified by what he does and not by faith alone. As the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without deeds is dead. - James 2:24, 26

Are you aware that the book of James almost didn’t make it into the Bible? Are you aware that Martin Luther called the book of James “the gospel of straw?” The book of James was seen by some as preaching a different gospel—a gospel of justification by works and not by faith. James 2:24 is probably the verse that agitated the most detraction. Taken out of context, this scripture, which says, “*A person is justified by what he does and not by faith alone,*” seems to be in sharp disagreement with the gospel of Christ. But taken in its immediate and larger biblical context, it not only makes sense, it provides a vital equilibrium for the doctrine of justification by faith.

I can see why Martin Luther had a problem with the book of James in general and this verse in particular. After all, he risked his life straining against the force of the engulfing doctrinal current of his day: Justification by works. But that was his day and this is ours. Things have changed. The flow has reversed and it seems that a great number of persons are being carried away by a different current—one of easy believism. “I believe in God,” they say. *Good! Even the demons believe that—and shudder* (v19). “I prayed a prayer and accepted Christ.” Great. But where is the evidence of that faith? The proof is in the pudding. *Faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead* (v17).

Faith, by itself, if not backed up by action is no faith at all

James never denied that a person is justified by faith. He said that a person is not justified by *faith alone*. Does this mean that he is saying a person is saved by a combination of faith and works? No. He is saying that *faith, by itself, if not backed up by action is no faith at all*. It is in that sense that *a person is justified by what he does and not by faith alone*.

I think Jesus was saying the same thing, when he said, “*Let your light shine before men in such a way that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father who is in heaven*” (Mt 5:16 NASB). Jesus is speaking here of the light of the Christian being set on a hill—the evidence that they are children of God. What is that evidence? Good works that proceed from faith. As James says, “*Show me your faith without deeds, and I will show you my faith by what I do*” (v18).

God included the book of James in the cannon of Scripture. I, for one, am glad. And if Martin Luther were alive today, my guess is that he would be too.

The Tongue Makes Great Boasts

Take ships as an example. Although they are so large and are driven by strong winds, they are steered by a very small rudder wherever the pilot wants to go. Likewise the tongue is a small part of the body, but it makes great boasts. -James 3:4-5

I recently returned from a two-week preaching and teaching trip to Peru. There, the Lord stretched me in ministry beyond anything that I had known previously. In the midst of the stretching—and his blessing, I became aware how easily it is to have a tongue that *makes great boasts*. As I taught pastors during the day and preached evangelistically at night, I gave illustrations from my past ministry experiences. In doing so, twice, I found myself embellishing a story in order to get a better response from the people and to make myself look special in their eyes. As the Spirit ministered his conviction, the most troubling thing to me was not just that I had done it, but how readily I had done it.

Your tongue was made for boasting, but not in yourself

The word says, *the tongue is a small part of the body, but it makes great boasts. The tongue, James says, is a fire, a world of evil among the parts of the body. It corrupts the whole person, sets the whole course of his life on fire, and is itself set on fire by hell (v6). As you know, the tongue can do great damage. The power of words can hardly be overestimated. The tongue can be a restless evil, full of deadly poison (v8).*

Of course, it is not the tongue itself that is the source of all this corruption. Jesus explained that *out of the overflow of the heart the mouth speaks (Mt 12:34)*. That which you speak is an indication of that which is in your heart. What was in my heart as my tongue was making its false boasts? Insecurity and the desire for approval. When Paul appealed to those things that commended him in ministry, one of them was *truthful speech* (see 2 Corinthians 6:4, 7). The very thing that I wanted—commendation for my ministry—was being undermined by my lack of truthful speech.

So, who can tame the tongue? *“No one,” says James (v8). All kinds of animals, birds, reptiles and creatures of the sea are being tamed and have been tamed by man (v7) but only the Holy Spirit can keep a reign on our tongues. Such a little part of the body, James says—but it steers the whole ship. And left unchecked will do its share of boasting.*

When this little member of your body begins to boast, remember that any basis of your boasting is excluded by the cross. Your tongue was made for boasting, but not in yourself. *Let him who boasts boast in the Lord (2 Co 10:17).*

The Spirit He Caused to Live in Us Envies Intensely

You adulterous people, don't you know that friendship with the world is hatred toward God? Anyone who chooses to be a friend of the world becomes an enemy of God. Or do you think Scripture says without reason that the Spirit he caused to live in us envies intensely? -James 4:4-5

There can be no doubt that we serve a jealous God. When the Lord revealed himself to his people at Sinai, he said, *“Do not worship any other god, for the Lord, whose name is Jealous, is a jealous God” (Ex 34:14)*. If he was jealous over his people who worshiped him from a distance, how much more intense would his jealousy be for the people in whom he now dwells?

If and when we give our hearts to the things of the world, we commit spiritual adultery. Affection toward the things of the world is enmity with God because the world is opposed to God and his ways. Consider what feelings you would have toward your spouse if he or she were unfaithful to you. Now consider what feelings you might have if you found out that your spouse's unfaithfulness was with your avowed enemy—someone whom he or she knew hated and opposed you. Your spouse's infidelity with your enemy would add insult to your injury. So it is when we commit spiritual infidelity with the things of the world. Not only are we being unfaithful to the God who loves us but we are turning our backs on him for the things he hates—the very things that cost Jesus his life.

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To the Corinthians, Paul said, *“I am jealous for you with a godly jealousy. I promised you to one husband, to Christ, so that I might present you as a pure virgin to him. But I am afraid that just as Eve was deceived by the serpent's cunning, your minds may somehow be led astray from your sincere and pure devotion to Christ” (2 Co 11:2-3)*. Paul's jealousy was born out of the Spirit's jealousy. The Spirit of God that dwells within us *envies intensely* for our *sincere and pure devotion to Christ*. It is possible to grieve the Holy Spirit. God is a God of emotion. He is a jealous God. Concerning his people he said, *“I am very jealous for Zion; I am burning with jealousy for her” (Zec 8:2)*. Why do you think that the Lord left the house of Israel desolate to herself (see Matthew 23:38)? It certainly wasn't because he was indifferent toward her.

The Spirit he caused to live in us envies intensely. It matters to God, probably more than you know, if your affections drift toward the world. Why? Because he is passionately jealous over you.

Instead, You Ought to Say, "If it is the Lord's Will"

Now listen, you who say, "Today or tomorrow we will go to this or that city, spend a year there, carry on business and make money." Why, you do not even know what will happen tomorrow...Instead, you ought to say, "If it is the Lord's will, we will live and do this or that." -James 4:13-15

Part of acknowledging the sovereignty of God is acknowledging the indefiniteness of our subsistence. The modern proverb, "The only two things that are certain in life are death and taxes," points to the fact that despite whatever orbit our lives have taken so far, there is no such thing as a sure thing. There are probabilities in life but, apart from the hand of the Lord, there are no certainties, so we should presume nothing.

Those who take for granted that "Today or tomorrow we will go to this or that city, spend a year there, carry on business and make money" do not acknowledge the tenuousness of life nor submit to the sovereignty of God. Jesus told a story about a rich man who said to himself, "You have plenty of good things laid up for many years. Take life easy; eat, drink and be merry." But God said to him, "You fool! This very night your life will be demanded from you" (Lk 12:19-20). Thankfully, life is not a game of Russian Roulette but individuals are blind-sided by the unexpected every day. Life can change in an instant. Circumstances can turn on a dime. Chances are that you will live to see tomorrow but those who choose to ignore the reality of life's impermanence will discover their mortality at an hour too late to change their lives for the better. *What is your life*, James says? *It is a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes* (v14). People expect their "three score and ten" but they don't always get it. Who knows when their last breath will be?

Concerning what will happen today or tomorrow, we can and should make our plans and have certain hopes and expectations—but always with the acknowledgment that Someone Else holds ultimate sway on whether those plans come to pass. We do not possess ultimate control of our destiny. That control belongs to the Lord. When we make our plans our attitude should be, "If it is the Lord's will, we will live and do this or that." It's one axiom that we should always confess. When you say "The Lord willing" as an addendum to all your stated plans, you are not being superstitious; you are acknowledging the sovereignty of God in the affairs of life.

There are probabilities in life but, apart from the hand of the Lord, there are no certainties, so we should presume nothing

Confess Your Sins...So That You May Be Healed

The prayer offered in faith will make the sick person well; the Lord will raise him up. If he has sinned, he will be forgiven. Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. - James 5:15-16

In John 9, the disciples of Jesus came across a man who was blind from birth. They asked, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" "Neither this man nor his parents sinned," said Jesus (vs 2-3). This exchange helps us to understand that sickness is not necessarily a result of sin. But does it follow that sickness is never a result of sin? James gives indication that a person's sickness could indeed be a result of their sin.

Most of us are familiar with the prescription that James gives for those who are sick. What should they do? They should call for the elders (the pastors) of the church to pray over them and anoint them with oil in the name of the Lord. The promise is that the prayer offered in faith will make the sick person well—because the Lord will raise him up. That is the extent of the prescription, as far as most of us understand. But there is more to it than that. There may need to be the confession and forgiveness of sin. Regarding the sick person, James says, "If he has sinned, he will be forgiven" and he immediately goes on to say "Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed."

There may have to be confession of sin for the healing to be enacted

James' prescription indicates that there may have to be confession of sin for the healing to be enacted. The further implication is that, in some cases, a person's sickness will be linked to a personal sin and the key to their healing will be the confession of that sin. For example, one of our pastors was involved in praying for a lady who had come forward to receive prayer for her back problems. There was the anointing with oil and the prayer offered in faith—but no healing. The Lord specifically showed the pastor that the lady had the sin of unforgiveness toward her uncle. When the lady was tactfully asked about any possible unforgiveness in her life, she mentioned her uncle. After she confessed her sin of unforgiveness and released her uncle from the debt he owed her, the prayer of faith was offered and she was immediately healed.

Once, after Jesus had healed a man, he said, "Stop sinning or something worse may happen to you" (Jn 5:14). It may not be overly polite to suggest that someone's ailment may be a result of sin—but if it is, then the best thing we can do is deal with the sin so that they may be healed.

So That Your Faith May Be Proved Genuine

Now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials. These have come so that your faith—of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire—may be proved genuine and may result in praise, glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed. -1 Peter 1:6-7

There is really no way for our faith in God to be proved genuine other than to be challenged by the trials of life. It's when the rubber hits the road that you know if you really have faith. How can you know your faith is real unless it is tested? And most often, the testing comes through *grief in all kinds of trials*.

The book of First Peter is one of the most affirming and encouraging books in the entire Bible. Read through it sometime and notice all the positive and heartening statements that are made. There are dozens of them. Peter was writing to *God's elect, strangers in the world, scattered throughout Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia and Bithynia—a church that lived their lives among the pagans* (2:12) and faced much hardship and persecution. And so he reminds them, *“For a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials.”* Why do they have to face these trials? *“These have come”* Peter tells them, *“So that your faith—of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire—may be proved genuine and may result in praise, glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed.”*

James says essentially the same thing: *Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance* (Ja 1:2-3). Jesus also spoke about the testing of our faith in the parable of the sower when he taught about the seed that fell on rocky places that could not withstand the heat of the day: *“When trouble or persecution comes because of the word, he quickly falls away”* (Mt 13:21). Such a person's faith does not stand under trial. And consider Job. Was it not in the most severe trials that his faith was proved genuine?

The word “trial” itself means “to be tested.” It is in the trials of life that our faith is proved genuine. And so it must be. But this faith, says Peter, is *of greater worth than gold*. And when your faith has been tested and proved genuine, it will *result in praise, glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed*. A praise, glory and honor that will totally eclipse whatever has come to test our faith and prove it to be genuine.

How can you know your faith is real unless it is tested?

Through Him You Believe in God

He was chosen before the creation of the world, but was revealed in these last times for your sake. Through him you believe in God, who raised him from the dead and glorified him, and so your faith and hope are in God. -1 Peter 1:20-21

Webster defines an agent as a person empowered to act for another. Jesus is God's agent. He is the perfect and the only fully authorized representative of God. He is *the image of the invisible God* (Col 1:15), *the radiance of God's glory, and the exact representation of his being* (Heb 1:3). According the intention of God, if you want to believe in him you will have to believe the one he has chosen as his representative.

Peter makes this clear with a simple and straightforward statement. He says concerning Jesus, *“Through him you believe in God...and so your faith and hope are in God.”* It is through Jesus that we believe in God. Some may contend that you can just believe in God, period. But what kind of God are you believing in when you do that? What is the understanding of who this God is? How do you know that your perception of God agrees with the actual truth about God? What is the authoritative basis for what you believe? Do you think it matters to God what you believe about him? I have heard people say, “I have my own faith.” That's like someone saying, “I have my own money” as they pull some colored paper from their billfold that has come fresh from their inkjet printer. “Your own faith” is as useful as your bogus money. You have the right to believe as you choose but for the currency of your faith in God to be legitimate it must bear the mark of the one in authority. It must be based in truth. And God has authorized Jesus as the agent of that truth. That's why Jesus said, *“I am the way, the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me”* (Jn 14:6).

It is through Jesus that we believe in God. It is through Jesus *the forgiveness of sins is proclaimed* (Ac 13:38). It is through Jesus that *grace and truth came* (Jn 1:17). It is through Jesus that God *reconciled us to himself* (2 Co 5:18). It is through Jesus that we are adopted as children of God (Eph 1:5). It is through Jesus that God generously poured out the Holy Spirit on us (Tit 3:6). And, it is through Jesus that *God will judge men's secrets* (Ro 2:16).

When you believe in Jesus, you believe in God. When you refuse to believe in Jesus, you refuse to believe in God. You can't believe in God according to your own fancy. You must believe according to how he has chosen to reveal himself. It is through Jesus that we truly believe in God.

You can't believe in God according to your own fancy

A Chosen People, a Royal Priesthood, a Holy Nation

You are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light. -1 Peter 2:9

We are told in the Scriptures not to think of ourselves more highly than we ought (see Romans 12:3). Paul's warning is, no doubt, against personal pride. But there is much to be said for comprehending our high standing as the people of God. As Peter admonishes and encourages the suffering Christians he tells them, "*You are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light.*"

We are a chosen people. How does it feel to be chosen? Can you remember a time when you were chosen? Perhaps you were chosen to be part of the team or a special group. There is a sense of worth, a sense of fulfillment, with being chosen. We all know how it feels to be passed over. But that is not the case here. We have been chosen by the highest authority to be part of the most honored assembly. Jesus said, "*You did not choose me, but I chose you...I have chosen you out of the world*" (Jn 15:16, 19).

We have been chosen by the highest authority to be part of the most honored assembly

We are a royal priesthood. My guess is that 99 percent of us don't grasp this. We know the term "royal priesthood" and may even be able to cite the scriptural reference, but how many of us actually see ourselves as priestly royalty? We are priests of God—intermediaries between God and mankind. Through the gospel, we are representatives of the King to his subjects, and, through intercession, we are representatives of the people to the King. Our priestly function is amplified by the fact that we are royalty. We bear the King's name. We are of the regal bloodline.

We are a holy nation. Holy means set apart for the purposes of God. We are not only a holy nation, we are the holy nation. We are the people of God. We are the ones he has sanctified to fulfill his purposes on the earth. The sooner we begin to see ourselves in this light, the sooner we will begin to fulfill those purposes.

We are a people belonging to God. We are the fulfillment of Exodus 19:5-6, where the Lord says, "*Out of all nations you will be my treasured possession. Although the whole earth is mine, you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.*"

And the purpose of all this? *That you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light.*

You Are Her Daughters If You Do Not Give Way to Fear

This is the way the holy women of the past who put their hope in God used to make themselves beautiful. They were submissive to their own husbands, like Sarah, who obeyed Abraham and called him her master. You are her daughters if you do what is right and do not give way to fear. -1 Peter 3:5-6

The Christian Reformed Church in our city sponsors an event every October called "The Life Chain." It is a peaceful pro-life demonstration where Christians line up and down one of our thoroughfares holding signs that carry positive pro-life messages. On two separate occasions, as I have participated in the Life Chain, women who were driving by gave me the finger. Of course, I understood that the anger that they were expressing came from a place of pain, fear and mistrust of men—the same pain, fear and mistrust that was at the core of the feminist movement of a generation ago. And even though the feminist movement has faded, the issues that women face regarding pain, fear and mistrust are still very real and present.

It can be the scariest thing for a woman who has had her trust in men violated to submit herself to her husband's authority

It is interesting that when Peter speaks to the Christian women about being submissive to their husbands, his advice to them is "*do not give way to fear.*" It can be the scariest thing for a woman who has had her trust in men violated to submit herself to her husband's authority and care. For many women, that place of submission—which is meant to be a place of protective covering—does not feel as if it would be a safe place. For those women who as girls did not experience their fathers as the type of servant-leader Jesus epitomized but suffered at the hands of domineering and/or abusive men, the idea of submission is more than archaic—it is disturbing.

But Peter's advice to women (no, it's not just Paul who had this bent) was that they should be more concerned about the inner and *unfading beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit, which is of great worth in God's sight* (v4) than their outward adornment and appearance. Peter is clear that part of that inner beauty is a spirit of submissiveness. This is what Sarah had as she recognized and submitted to the headship of her husband Abraham. Women who would follow her example would be considered her daughters if they *do what is right and do not give way to fear.*

For many women, it takes a lot of courage to "do what is right" when it comes to recognizing and submitting to the headship of their husbands. For others, it is a very natural thing—as it ought to be. But if a woman will face those fears and commit herself to a submissive and active recognition of her husband's headship, her beauty, and that of the relationship, will flourish.

Seek Peace and Pursue it

Whoever would love life and see good days must keep his tongue from evil and his lips from deceitful speech. He must turn from evil and do good; he must seek peace and pursue it. -1 Peter 3:10-11

Peace is not always viewed as something that is pursued. Usually, we see peace as something that somehow just comes to us. But as Peter quotes Psalm 34, he reminds his readers that if we *would love life and see good days we must seek peace and pursue it.*

There are different ways that we can pursue peace. First of all, peace needs to be actively sought when there is contention in our relationships. The importance of vigorously pursuing relational harmony can scarcely be overestimated. Jesus said, *"If you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to your brother; then come and offer your gift"* (Mt 5:23-24). Paul said, *"If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone,"* and, *"Make every effort to do what leads to peace and to mutual edification"* (Ro 12:18; 14:19). This is pursuing peace.

The peace of God is not arbitrarily given

Another way of pursuing peace is being ready and willing to forgive. I know a man who refuses to forgive or have anything to do with his brother. He could pick up the phone at any time and call his brother but he won't. He is not making every effort to do what leads to peace. *Does he intend to love life and see good days?* Then he needs to seek peace and pursue it. Jesus also said, *"If you do not forgive men their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins"* (Mt 6:15). So when you pursue peace with others you are also pursuing peace with God.

Which leads me to a third way to *seek peace and pursue it.* It is seeking after the peace of God. The peace of God is not arbitrarily given. It doesn't just come randomly floating down like snow. Peace is first achieved through faith in Christ: *Since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ* (Ro 5:1). In addition, our personal habits and patterns tend to either cultivate or eradicate the peace of God. As the prophet said, *"You will keep in perfect peace him whose mind is steadfast, because he trusts in you"* (Is 26:3). And consider Paul's advice: *"Whatever you have learned or received or heard from me, or seen in me—put it into practice. And the God of peace will be with you"* (Php 4:9).

Some say that peace is hard to find. At times, it is. But if we seek peace and pursue it, we will be that much more likely to love life and see good days.

He Who Has Suffered in His Body Is Done with Sin

Therefore, since Christ suffered in his body, arm yourselves also with the same attitude, because he who has suffered in his body is done with sin. As a result, he does not live the rest of his earthly life for evil human desires, but rather for the will of God. -1 Peter 4:1-2

Have you ever wanted to be *done with sin*? To be able to, in a very real and practical way, be personally free from the power and effects of sin? To put sinning on the shelf? To be done with it in your own life? Can it be done? It's not really possible, is it?

According to Peter, it is possible, for he says, *"He who has suffered in his body is done with sin."* Some might wonder if the "he" to whom Peter is referring is actually the Lord Jesus himself, but the context does not really allow that interpretation. If you can follow Jesus' example as he learned what it meant to suffer in his body, you will learn what it means to *put to death whatever belongs to your earthly nature* (Col 3:5).

It's not until we have crucified the flesh, making our bodies subject to the will of God only, that we can be done with sin.

We do have to be careful in applying what Peter says but just because the concept seems foreign to us we should not shy away from the plain sense that he makes. Yes, throughout history the religious zealot's self-effort to overcome sin has been a sorry legacy of isolationism and cruel asceticism. To become secluded in the Himalayas with a regular routine of self-inflicted pain cannot kill off the sinful nature. Regarding such "self-discipline" Paul comments that such practices *indeed have an appearance of wisdom with their self-imposed worship, their false humility and their harsh treatment of the body, but they lack any value in restraining sensual indulgence* (Col 2:23).

But Jesus did "suffer in his body" and if we suffer in our bodies with the same attitude that Jesus had it will result in living our lives not for evil human desires but rather for the will of God. How does this work? I believe it has to do with the suffering that Jesus experienced when he gave up his life and suffered death on the cross. Philippians 2 says, *Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus, who...become obedient to death—even death on a cross.* It's not until we too have crucified the flesh, making our bodies subject to the will of God only, that we can be done with sin. It won't be pleasant. Your carnal nature will hate it. That's to be expected because the sinful nature wars against your soul (see 1 Peter 2:11). But to the extent that you have suffered in your body and have put to death the misdeeds of the sinful nature you will be done with sin.

Resist Him

Be self-controlled and alert. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour. Resist him, standing firm in the faith, because you know that your brothers throughout the world are undergoing the same kind of sufferings. -1 Peter 5:8-9

Peter gives us a vivid and familiar word picture to describe the nature of our *enemy the devil*. He *prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour*. How are we to deal with him? Peter gives us the answer in two little words: *Resist him*.

As Peter exhorts us regarding our fight with Satan, he is actually using the storyline for millions of tales—stories that are depicted every day in every medium imaginable. It is the storyline that, by far and away, is the all-time, number one theme of narratives whenever and however they are told. It is the subject of the resistance of good against evil.

Few are the stories that do not carry this theme. Think of the movies that attract and inspire the masses. From “Gladiator” to “The Lion King” to “The Matrix” to “The Lord of the Rings.” It’s all about good triumphing over evil—the good guys vanquishing the bad guys. And how do they do it? Through bravery and courage. Through faith. Through standing firm in the face of evil danger. Through resisting the enemy.

Peter says that the way to overcome our enemy, the devil, is to *resist him, standing firm in the faith*. The word “resist” literally means “to stand against.” Because the devil’s primary tactic is intimidation, the worst thing we can do is back down. But even the smallest child can resist him. While teaching a lesson to the preschool children one Sunday, I had them go into a large playhouse that we have at the church. I knocked on the door and they asked, “Who’s there? I said “Jesus,” and they all said, “Come in Jesus.” After I went out again, I knocked on the door once more and when they asked who it was, I said “It’s Satan.” Immediately, a little four-year-old girl stuck her head out the window, pointed at me and said, “Satan, in the name of Jesus, you get out of here right now!”

James 4:7 says, *resist the devil, and he will flee from you*. Resist him. It is in the resistance that your authority is exercised, your will is strengthened and his weapons are quashed. Use *the shield of faith, with which you can extinguish all the flaming arrows of the evil one* (Eph 6:16). Resist him. Stand your ground, face to face. And don’t be surprised when you win. That is the way the story is supposed to go.

It is in the resistance that your authority is exercised, your will is strengthened and his weapons are quashed

Add to Your Faith

Make every effort to add to your faith goodness; and to goodness, knowledge; and to knowledge, self-control; and to self-control, perseverance; and to perseverance, godliness; and to godliness, brotherly kindness; and to brotherly kindness, love. For if you possess these qualities in increasing measure... -2 Peter 1:5-7

Peter denotes eight qualities of the Christian life that, if you possess in increasing measure, will *keep you from being ineffective and unproductive in your knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ*. Peter shows us how these characteristics are related and actually “feed” each other so that they can continue to increase within us:

Add to your faith goodness. Peter starts with faith, the basis of our relationship with Christ, and says we are to add to our faith, goodness. This “goodness” has to do with moral excellence. Our faith will be purified and enhanced as we live upright and morally. Without this moral excellence our faith will dissipate.

To goodness, knowledge. We enhance our goodness with knowledge. If we grow in our knowledge of the Lord, his will and the Scriptures, our moral excellence will be amply supplied.

To knowledge, self-control. Knowledge in turn is supplied by self-control. Knowledge in any field cannot be gained without the discipline brought by self-control.

To self-control, perseverance. Perseverance is needed for self-control to continue to operate—so that you can increase in knowledge, so that you can know what is good, so that your faith may be strong and pure.

To perseverance, godliness. Being like God in attitude and action will keep you from being hindered as you persevere in his will. Satan had nothing he could use in Jesus to hinder him from completing his mission. Godliness will supply your perseverance.

To godliness, brotherly kindness. Brotherly kindness (Greek: philadelphia) needs to supply our godliness because our love for our brothers and sisters is a test of our love for God (see 1 John 4:20) as well as an indication of how much we are like God.

To brotherly kindness, love. Finally, what do we need to love our brothers? The love of Jesus— “agape” love that is poured into our hearts from heaven. As Peter starts with faith, he ends with love, the greatest quality of all.

Peter shows us how these characteristics are related and actually “feed” each other

The Truth You Now Have

So I will always remind you of these things, even though you know them and are firmly established in the truth you now have. I think it is right to refresh your memory as long as I live in the tent of this body. -2 Peter 1:12-13

It is intriguing how entire denominations can be misguided by one small error of biblical interpretation. For example, the Seventh-Day Adventists change the comma in Luke 23:43 (“*I tell you the truth today, you will be with me in paradise*”) to support their notion of “soul sleep.” And certain Word of Faith groups talk about the “now faith” of Hebrews 11:1 as if “now” was an adjective and not an interjection.

Consider, as well, those who understand and use 2 Peter 1:12 inappropriately. In the NIV, this verse says, *So I will always remind you of these things, even though you know them and are firmly established in the truth you now have.* But it is the KJV that is quoted and lends itself to the error of interpretation: *Wherefore I will not be negligent to put you always in remembrance of these things, though ye know them, and be established in the present truth.* The error is in the postulation that Peter is speaking to his readers of a present truth in the sense that there was to be a future and different truth yet to be revealed. The idea is that there is now a present truth that will give way to an even greater revelation of truth as time goes on. So, if you get a revelation of a new and now “present truth,” you can promote it as such.

Would you think that Peter would endorse the idea that truth is transitory? Of course not. What is the truth that Peter has just reminded the believers about? The elemental truths of the Christian life: Faith, goodness, knowledge, self-control, perseverance, godliness, brotherly kindness and love. These things do not make up a “present” truth in terms of time but a truth that is “present” in terms of place. “Present” in terms of time means that something or someone is with you at the present moment. “Present” in terms of place means that something or someone is “present” with you. It is in the latter sense that this word (Greek: *parousē*) should be interpreted.

To provide balance, let me say that even though truth is not transitory our ability to see truth can certainly change. It has always been the Lord’s prerogative to open the minds of believers to various aspects of the truths of the gospel as time goes by. Often, our understanding of doctrinal truth changes because the Lord allows us a new experience in those truths. There can be greater light and increased revelation—but it will always be of the deposit of truth that we already and presently have.

Truth is not transitory

Many Will Bring the Way of Truth into Disrepute

But there were also false prophets among the people, just as there will be false teachers among you. They will secretly introduce destructive heresies, even denying the sovereign Lord who bought them--bringing swift destruction on themselves. Many will follow their shameful ways and will bring the way of truth into disrepute. -2 Peter 2:1-2

The assembly of those who profess the truth has never lacked for false teachers who have led their followers into immoral conduct, bringing *the way of truth into disrepute*. More often than not, it seems that these false teachers were at one time true followers of the way with a solid grip on the truth (i.e., Jim Jones). But for various reasons, some which Peter mentions, they become purveyors of *destructive heresies* that end up wrecking the lives of their followers and do damage to the gospel of Christ.

Just as we know that there were false prophets who prophesied alongside those men who *spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit* (1:21), Peter warns that there will be false teachers among us who *secretly introduce destructive heresies, even denying the sovereign Lord who bought them*. We have a man just like that in my city. He has gained an international following as a mystic—a man in touch with the divine, perhaps even himself divine. Don’t expect a lot of action when you go to the gathering of his faithful. If you make it past the bouncers, it’s enough just to sit in his presence. In fact, that may be all that happens in the two to three hours of the gathering. He likes to try to mesmerize people just by looking at them. Never mind that it is open knowledge that he regularly has sex with two beautiful sisters (an indiscretion for which his wife has left him). Never mind that he graduated from a reputable bible school but now never speaks of the efficacy of the cross of Christ or the name of Jesus. Never mind that he has slyly introduced false teaching causing many to follow his shameful ways. Never mind that he has brought the way of truth into disrepute in the local and national media.

Of such persons, Peter says, *their destruction has not been sleeping* (v3). Those who bring the way of truth into disrepute you have provoked the indignation of the Almighty. You don’t mess with the reputation of the way of truth. Ananias and Sapphira did—*bringing swift destruction on themselves*.

The psalmist said, “*May those who hope in you not be disgraced because of me*” (Ps 69:6). May this be your sincere and ever-answered prayer.

Those who bring the way of truth into disrepute you have provoked the indignation of the Almighty

The Day of the Lord Will Come like a Thief

The day of the Lord will come like a thief. The heavens will disappear with a roar; the elements will be destroyed by fire, and the earth and everything in it will be laid bare. -2 Peter 3:10

I think that the most important question in biblical eschatology (the study of last things) is this: Is the return of Christ and the Day of the Lord the same thing? Modern pop theology says no. I say yes.

What is the issue here? The issue is whether there will be 1) A secret coming of the Lord to steal his people away with another coming to happen yet again at a later date or 2) If his coming will usher in the great cataclysmic judgment known as the day of the Lord. Before I point out how I think 2 Peter 3:10 speaks to this question, let me make a few observations from other biblical texts to support the idea that the day of the Lord coincides with the return of Jesus: Modern popular North American theology (this theology has ascendancy neither in antiquity nor the aggregate Christian world) teaches a “secret rapture”—that is, when Jesus comes back, the believers will be taken and the unsaved are left to guess what happened to all the Christians. It’s not that I don’t believe in a “rapture.” I just don’t believe in a secret one. Why? Because when Jesus comes, we rise, not vanish (see 1 Thessalonians 4:17; Acts 1:9-11). Because Jesus’ himself will be visible to all at his return (see Mathew 24:26-27, 30; Revelation 1:7). And because Jesus’ return will be heralded by the voice of the archangel and the trumpet call of God (see 1 Thessalonians 4:16). In addition, please note that 1 Thessalonians 5:2 and 2 Thessalonians 1:7-10 equate the coming of the Lord with a cataclysmic judgment.

Don’t count on more than one return of Christ

Now, Peter makes reference to the “day of the Lord,” which was a common Old Testament designation for the judgment that was coming at the end of the age: *In the fire of his jealousy the whole world will be consumed, for he will make a sudden end of all who live in the earth* (Zeph 1:18). Peter’s description of the day of the Lord is consistent, of course, with this idea that the end will come with a great cataclysm (see also Matthew 24:29-35; Luke 21:25-28 and Acts 2:20). Peter says, *“The heavens will disappear with a roar; the elements will be destroyed by fire, and the earth and everything in it will be laid bare.”* What should be noticed here is that Peter says that *the day of the Lord will come like a thief*. This phrase connects the day of the Lord with the coming of Jesus because we know that Jesus taught that his coming will be like a thief who comes unexpectedly and without warning (see Matthew 24:43-44).

So don’t count on more than one return of Christ or that salvation is possible after he comes. It ain’t happenin’.

God is Light

This is the message we have heard from him and declare to you: God is light; in him there is no darkness at all.-1 John 1:5

The writings of John the apostle can be described as “simple yet deep.” He begins his letter known as First John with one of those plain but profound assertions. He says, *“God is light.”*

Light itself is simple yet profound. Physicists are still exploring the vast and amazing characteristics of light. From photosynthesis to radiation to photography to lasers to a hundred other light-related sciences, the discoveries of the properties of light continue to captivate scientists and change our daily lives. Yet what is more elemental to life than light? Plain but profound. Here we have an apt description of our God.

Understanding the statement that God is light is probably like attempting to understand light itself. We can only hope to continually gain a relatively small amount of revelation of what that means. In what sense is God light? In a literal sense? In a figurative sense? Does he consist of light? Does he contain light? Does he emit light? Is he the source of light? Is the statement, *“God is light”* merely a figurative description or are there qualities of God’s being that determine our physical world?

In what sense is God light?

The Scriptures give us some insight. The very first thing that God spoke into existence was light. *“Let there be light, and there was light”* (Ge 1:3). Light did not precede God; God came before light and created it. Light has its genesis in God and before anything else existed, light came into being. There is no life without light. The nature of light reveals a particular essence of who God is. John does not use light just as a metaphor to describe God. God is light and, as such, to understand light is to gain insight into the nature of the One from whom light proceeds.

After Moses spent forty days and nights in the presence of God on Mount Sinai he came down with his physical being literally aglow (see Exodus 34:29-30 and 2 Corinthians 3:7) The same thing happened to Jesus on the Mount of Transfiguration (see Matthew 17:2). And when the angels, who continually dwell in the presence of God appeared to the shepherds in Luke 2, *the glory of the Lord shone around* (v9).

Certainly, there is a figurative sense to John’s revelation for, morally speaking, he says about God, *“In him there is no darkness at all”* (v5). And so, his simple statement that *“God is light,”* no doubt, carries a wonderful and deep meaning that may never be fully understood.

Do Not Love the World

Do not love the world or anything in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For everything in the world--the cravings of sinful man, the lust of his eyes and the boasting of what he has and does--comes not from the Father but from the world. The world and its desires pass away, but the man who does the will of God lives forever. -1 John 2:15-17

Friendship with the world is hatred toward God (Ja 4:4). Jesus taught us that you can't be loyal to two masters at the same time (see Luke 16:13). The world is part of the unholy trinity, along with the flesh and the devil, which war against our souls and quench our spiritual fervor. This is why John commands us, "*Do not love the world or anything in the world.*"

The world, as John uses it here, is different than when he wrote, *for God so loved the world that he gave his one and only son...* (Jn 3:16). In that sense, the world is the compilation of all the precious souls who live on the earth. In First John, it is the wicked spiritual system of anti-God sentiment that pervades society and entices us to sin. John gives three defining categories so that we will know what he means when he is talking about *the world*.

The world is the wicked spiritual system of anti-God sentiment that pervades society and entices us to sin

He first categorizes the world as *the cravings of sinful man*. We all know the desires of the sinful nature (literally: the lust of the flesh) which pull us into the things of the world and away from our consecration to the Lord. Illicit sexual behavior, gluttony, drunkenness, gossip and backbiting, slothfulness and many other indulgences of the flesh lead us away from the Lord and his blessings. We need to keep in mind that these cravings are insatiable. They bring satisfaction for increasingly short seasons and require continually higher doses of indulgence to match previous saturations of the flesh. These cravings tend to increase at the onset of emotional pain but the Lord wants us to bring that pain to him.

The second category is *the lust of the eyes*. The world has the allurements of fame, power, fortune and the promise of fulfillment through materialism. Consumer debt is oppressive and pandemic in our society. People see something that they want—including their neighbor's wife—and they go to great lengths to get it.

The third category, *the boasting of what [one] has and does*, has to do with the deadliest of sins—pride. The world is full of boasting and selfish ambition but *the world and its desires pass away*. In the end, *everyone who exalts himself will be humbled* (see Luke 14:7-11) but *the man who does the will of God will live forever*.

Their Going Showed That None of Them Belonged To Us

Dear children, this is the last hour; and as you have heard that the antichrist is coming, even now many antichrists have come. This is how we know it is the last hour. They went out from us, but they did not really belong to us. For if they had belonged to us, they would have remained with us; but their going showed that none of them belonged to us. -1 John 2:18-19

People leave churches for various reasons. There are valid reasons and ill-founded reasons. Some people leave on a positive note and are celebrated as the Lord leads them on to other vineyards of his service—sometimes half-a-world away. Many times these persons are commissioned by the church from which they go out and remain officially connected and prayerfully covered by the sending church. Most departures from local congregations, however, are not as encouraging. Many part company over disagreements or a conflict of values, many more over offenses. Others leave because their felt needs are not being met. And still others because of a spurious commitment to the fellowship and a loose affiliation with the truth of the gospel of Christ.

People leave churches for various reasons

In John's day, there was a group of persons who had been a part of the fellowship of the church who went out on their own with a teaching that did not conform to the gospel of Christ. Historians have speculated that these were the "Gnostics" of the day. John said about them, "*They went out from us, but they did not really belong to us. For if they had belonged to us, they would have remained with us; but their going showed that none of them belonged to us.*" Among other things, John was pointing that this group that had once been a part of the fellowship never really belonged to the fellowship because they did not remain committed and submitted to the church. The fact that they had gone out promoting a spurious doctrine was one indication that they did not really belong to the apostolic church. And the fact that they went out and never came back to be part of the fold was the confirmation that they were on their own with no substantive connection with the church. When they left the church to never come back it showed "*that none of them belonged to us.*"

I wish that the church of today was like the church in John's day in the sense that you couldn't just jump to the congregation across town with little or no accountability. There simply was no other congregation across town in John's day. There was but one church, not only theoretically but practically, in any city during the New Testament era. If heretics or trouble-makers left the fellowship, their leaven was prevented from spreading because they could be identified as not really belonging to the church.

Everyone Who Has This Hope in Him Purifies Himself

Dear friends, now we are children of God, and what we will be has not yet been made known. But we know that when he appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is. Everyone who has this hope in him purifies himself, just as he is pure. -1 John 3:2-3

Perhaps more than any other New Testament writing, the letter of 1 John advocates purity from sin. Ironically, there is one verse in 1 John that is understood by many to promote the idea that, even in Christ, we will continually live in sin. That verse is 1 John 1:8 which says, *If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us.* But we must put that verse in the context of the previous verse and the rest of the letter with John's exhortations to sinless purity: *The blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from all sin (1:7). No one who lives in him keeps on sinning. No one who continues to sin has either seen him or known him (3:6). No one who is born of God will continue to sin, because God's seed remains in him; he cannot go on sinning, because he has been born of God (3:9). We know that anyone born of God does not continue to sin; the one who was born of God keeps him safe, and the evil one cannot harm him (5:18).* (It should be noted that the NIV's use of "continue," "keeps on" and "go on" are aids for interpretation and do not exist in the original text. Take out those words and John's exhortations are even more forceful.) John is not promoting the idea that we will never sin. This is clear from 1:8-10 and 2:1. But it is even clearer that, in John's mind, an authentic, born-again relationship with God through Jesus Christ will preclude the predilection for sin.

Not only does the fact that we are bona fide children of God change our predisposed partiality to sin, John refers to another factor which should have a purifying effect on our lives. He speaks of the day when Jesus shall appear and we will be perfectly transformed into his likeness. It is what the Bible refers to as *the blessed hope, the glorious appearing of...Jesus* (Tit 2:13). John says, *"We know that when he appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is. Everyone who has this hope in him purifies himself, just as he is pure."* The expectant return of Jesus and the reality that when he comes we will be made like him motivates us toward becoming like him right here and right now. Like a bride who prepares for the wedding day, we purify ourselves in preparation for his return. When we see Jesus as he is, he will see us as we are. The more we can be conformed to his likeness now, the greater the hope of his return; and the greater the hope of his return, the more pure we will want to be when we see him face to face.

Like a bride who prepares for the wedding day, we purify ourselves in preparation for his return.

If Our Hearts Do Not Condemn Us

Dear friends, if our hearts do not condemn us, we have confidence before God and receive from him anything we ask, because we obey his commands and do what pleases him. -1 John 3:21-22

Teresa of Avila had a reputation among her peers as an intimate of God. One day a friend came to her because a mutual friend was deathly ill. He asked if she would go pray for this man's healing. She responded by saying, "Why do I always have to be the one to go pray for people, why don't you go pray for him." He said, "C'mon Teresa. We all know that God always answers your prayers." She then informed him that she had already been to see their friend and, indeed, God had heard her prayer and he was now healed.

There is a principle laid out in 1 John concerning how God answers prayer in terms of our confidence to come before him because of obedience. John says, *"Dear friends, if our hearts do not condemn us, we have confidence before God and receive from him anything we ask, because we obey his commands and do what pleases him."* It is hard to come before the Lord with your requests if your heart knows that you have not been walking in obedience toward him. Children have more confidence to approach their parents if they know that they have done everything that their parents have asked them to do. Sure, the devil would bring false condemnation to our hearts, but how can we come before the Lord with confidence to seek his favor when we know that we have not done what he has told us to do?

How can we come before the Lord with confidence to seek his favor when we know that we have not done what he has told us to do?

Three weeks ago, I was out in front of our church building and a man I knew approached and asked if he could borrow ten dollars because he was out of margarine and coffee. He said he would pay me back at the end of the week. I was glad to oblige; however, he didn't pay me back as promised. This past Sunday, before church, he approached me again and asked for another ten dollars. I didn't grab him by the throat and demand the ten dollars that he owed me but, as you could probably surmise, neither did I fork out another ten.

I am not saying that God is a legalistic stickler. God's mercy is much greater than we think and the efficacy of our works is much less. But the simple principle is that it is difficult to approach the throne of grace with confidence if our hearts condemn us. But if our hearts do not condemn us and we have cultivated a friendship with God through our obedience to him, *we receive from him anything we ask, because we obey his commands and do what pleases him.*

We Know and Rely on the Love God has for us

We know and rely on the love God has for us. God is love. Whoever lives in love lives in God, and God in him. In this way, love is made complete among us so that we will have confidence on the day of judgment, because in this world we are like him. There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear, because fear has to do with punishment. The one who fears is not made perfect in love. -1 John 4:16-18

A key to success in this life and confidence for the life to come is found in this simple statement in the book of 1 John: “*We know and rely on the love God has for us.*” The more a person loves us, the more we can rely on them. And when that person is our heavenly Father, who loves us with an everlasting love, our trust can be implicit.

We rely on, we trust in, and we believe in the love that God has for us. Children rely on the love of their parents. They must. Can you imagine the confidence that would be built into a child if he or she had parents who not only loved them entirely, but were perfectly reliable? The child would be a secure and confident. Why? Because they had come to know and rely on love.

He says, “*I have loved you with an everlasting love; I have drawn you with loving-kindness* (Jer 31:3). *How great is the love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are!* (1 Jn 3:1). *The Lord is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and rich in love* (Ps 145:8).

The Father wants us to rely on the love that he has for us. But in order to rely on it, we must first know it. And know it we can. God loved us so much that while we were still sinners he sent his only son to die for us so that the thing which separated us from his love, our sin, could be taken out of the way and his love could be poured in our hearts through the Holy Spirit. Once we know this love, we can begin to rely on it.

It is his love that we count on to see us through every challenge in life. It is his love that we believe in when all other affirmations have caved away. It is his love that goes beyond mere head knowledge and changing circumstance to give us the assurance that he will never leave us or forsake us. It is his love that is the only thing, along with his word, that lasts forever.

We know and rely on the love God has for us. Nothing else will do.

The Father wants us to rely on the love that he has for us

His Commands are not Burdensome

This is love for God: to obey his commands. And his commands are not burdensome. -1 John 5:3

You’ve probably heard the line from the song that goes “He ain’t heavy, he’s my brother.” The point being, and well taken, that to care for someone whom you consider your brother or sister is not regarded as a heavy burden. Why? Because you love that person and your love for them makes the things you do for them of no regret.

Many consider the commands of God to be heavy and burdensome. But to those who love God, anything that he would want us to do would not be considered burdensome because of our love for him and our desire to show that love through our obedience.

Can his commands seem burdensome? What if he wants us to love our enemies? What if he wants us to fast and pray? What if he wants us to sell what we have and give it to the poor? If God is calling us to do a particular thing it shouldn’t be burdensome for at least two reasons. First, we can be assured that his commands are good and will result only in good. If they are burdensome, it is the flesh that is feeling the pressure—and that’s not a particularly bad thing. His commands may be unpleasant to our carnal nature but good nonetheless. Obeying the commands of God when the flesh is balking is actually a good way to subdue that nature which wars against our souls.

The second reason God’s commands shouldn’t be burdensome is that our love for God makes whatever he would ask us to do nothing short of our greatest honor and pleasure. Jesus said “*If you love me you will obey what I command*” (Jn 14:15). Jesus does not try to coerce us into doing what he wants, whining like some manipulative and insecure lover saying “If you really cared about me you would do such and such.” No, the simple fact of the matter is that the fruit of love for Jesus is obedience. Love makes obedience desirable. If the commands are burdensome, then the love is not complete.

His commands aren’t burdensome. Really. To believe otherwise is an indication that one’s experience of the love that God has to give and the love one has to give in return is lacking. *This is love for God: to obey his commands. And his commands are not burdensome.*

Love makes obedience desirable

And This Is Love: That We Walk In Obedience

I am not writing you a new command but one we have had from the beginning. I ask that we love one another. And this is love: that we walk in obedience to his commands. As you have heard from the beginning, his command is that you walk in love. -2 John 1:5-6

Most people don't equate love with obedience. If you ask someone to give you a definition of love, it is not likely that you will hear them say, "To love is to obey." But this is exactly what the aged apostle, John, says to those whom he loves in the truth (v1). He says, "And this is love: that we walk in obedience to his commands."

Of course, as we saw in the previous devotional article, John learned this from Jesus and recorded him saying, "If you love me, you will obey what I command" (Jn 14:15). To love Jesus is to obey him. The greatest test of love for the Lord is our obedience to him. It is a simple matter. If we really love him we will walk in obedience to his commands. If we fail to walk according to his commands it shows that, at some point and at some level, our love for him has not been made complete.

Obedience is not love if it is grudgingly given

Abraham showed his love for the Lord by his obedience offer up his only son as a sacrifice. Joseph showed his love for the Lord by refusing to be enticed by Potipher's wife. Daniel showed his love for the Lord by continuing to pray to the God of Israel despite being threatened with death. And Jesus went to the cross, not only because he loved us but because he loved his Father and would walk in obedience to his command.

Children who love their parents obey them. Soldiers who love their country will go to their death to prove their loyalty. Even dogs, who are devoted to their masters, will show that devotion through their obedience. If we want to demonstrate our love for the Lord we will walk in obedience to his commands. True obedience flows out of our love for God and Jesus. This is the only way it really works. Obedience is not love if it is grudgingly given—it not even obedience, really. And obedience to the Lord will never be complicated by the possibility that the obedience might not lead to righteousness—as it can be with obedience to human authority,

So, let's get practical here. What is his command? That we *love one another* (see John 13:34-35; Romans 13:8; 1 Peter 1:22; 1 John 3:23; 2 John 1:5). The test of our love for God is how we love our brother because his command is that we love one another. *If anyone says, "I love God," yet hates his brother, he is a liar. For anyone who does not love his brother, whom he has seen, cannot love God, whom he has not seen. And he has given us this command: Whoever loves God must also love his brother* (1 Jn 4:20-21).

Demetrius Is Well Spoken Of By Everyone

Demetrius is well spoken of by everyone—and even by the truth itself. We also speak well of him, and you know that our testimony is true. -3 John 1:12

As John writes to his friend, Gaius, he mentions two different men by name: Diotrephes and Demetrius. They are a study in contrasts. Demetrius had a good name and Diotrephes did not. As Proverbs 22:1 says, *A good name is more desirable than great riches; to be esteemed is better than silver or gold.*

You probably recognize the name, Demetrius (my spell-checker did) but not Diotrephes (my spell-checker did not). Do a search of the name Demetrius and you will find namesakes scattered throughout the pages of the phone books of North America. Do the same search for the name Diotrephes and you come up empty. Why? Because Demetrius had a good name and Diotrephes did not. If these two names had been reversed in John's letter, we would recognize (and know how to pronounce) the name Diotrephes instead. Because the name is a bit Romanish for the tastes of most, it is not likely that you will name your son, Demetrius. But the chance that you will name your son, Diotrephes, is about the same as naming him Adolph.

A good name is more desirable than great riches

So what did John say about these two men? About Diotrephes, John said that he loved *to be first*; he refused to have anything to do with John; he was *gossiping maliciously*; and that he refused to *welcome the brothers*—stopping those who wanted to do so, putting them out of the church (vs 9-10). Here was a man who had some ecclesial authority but, because of his need to be the top dog, was manipulating and controlling the church with his carnal ambition. Thankfully, John had a different word about Demetrius. He was *well spoken of*. He had an excellent reputation, not just among a few but among *everyone*. And not only did John and his colleagues speak well of him but Demetrius was well spoken of *even by the truth itself*. This meant either that the Spirit of Truth bore witness to his good reputation or that the life he lived according to the truth bore the fruit of an excellent name.

My guess is that it wasn't long before Diotrephes lost his position of authority in the church. And there can be little doubt that Demetrius' reputation carried him to places of distinguished responsibility. Not everyone is necessarily going to speak well of you all the time. But be assured that your reputation will follow you—perhaps even to namesakes of your own.