

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Sunday, September 19, 2021**

HOLY LIVING IN A POST-9/11 WORLD:

Part 2

1 Peter 1: 13-25

Some things in life are too important to forget. The reason we celebrate the Sacrament of Communion on the first Sunday of each month is because what it symbolizes, the once-for-all time sacrifice of Jesus on the cross to save us from our sins, is too important to forget.

There are some things in life that are just too important to forget, like passwords. Or your wedding anniversary. Or your best friend's name. Maybe you can relate to this: Two older women were discussing the problems of getting older. One said: "The worst thing is when your memory starts to go. I've known you my whole life, and I can't think of your name. What is it?" The second woman thought for a moment, then said: "Do you need an answer right now?"

More seriously, there are some things we must never forget, lest we become complacent or arrogant and endanger ourselves or others by thinking that we are immune to danger.

There are some things we must never forget, lest we fail to appreciate the cost of our freedom and the sacrifices others have made for us.

There are some things we must never forget, lest we lose sight of what desperate sinners we are and what God, in His great mercy and grace, has done for us and for our salvation.

There are some things we must never forget, lest we fail to understand ...

How deep the Father's love for us
How vast beyond all measure
That He should give His only Son
To make a wretch His treasure.
(Stuart Townend ©1995 Thankyou Music)

There are some things in our *spiritual* life that are just too important to forget. So, David says in Psalm 103:

Praise the LORD, O my soul;
All that is within me, praise His holy name.
Praise the LORD, O my soul,
And forget not all His benefits –
Who forgives all your sins
And heals all your diseases,
Who redeems you from the pit

And crowns you with love and compassion,
 Who satisfies your desires with good things
 So that your youth (strength) is renewed
 Like the eagle's.
 (Psalm 103: 1-5)

There are also some things in our *nation's* life that are too important to forget. What happened on September 11, 2001, is one of those things we must never forget, so that we do not fail to learn from it, but also to take every appropriate step to make sure it never happens again. And to discern how God wants us to live in a world where such evil happens.

Last Sunday we began to think together about *Holy Living in a Post-9/11 World*. We saw what Peter wrote to 1st-century followers of Christ scattered throughout the Roman province of Asia Minor (Turkey), urging them to live holy lives in an often-hostile world. Of the seven imperatives Peter gives in this passage, we highlighted the first three, all of which are found in verse 13:

1. Prepare your mind for action. Get your mind in gear so you are alert to what is happening in the world and to what God is doing.
2. Be self-controlled. Live a life of godly self-control under the influence of the Holy Spirit.
3. Set your hope fully – *fully* – on the grace of God to be revealed when Jesus returns, and not on any earthly power or thing.

These imperatives are as relevant, as timely, and as greatly needed as much today, in our post-9/11 world, as they ever were. As are the remaining four imperatives for holy living in such a time as this.

So, let's look together at these imperatives. The first is this:

DO NOT CONFORM

Notice how Peter begins verse 14: "As obedient children ...". Let's stop right there for just a moment. "Obedient children." Obedient to whom? To God. Children of whom? Children of God, our Heavenly Father, who loves us with an everlasting love. We do not obey God in order to merit His love. We do not obey God in order to make ourselves acceptable to Him. We obey God because He has loved us first. Because He has accepted us and adopted us as His sons and daughters through the saving work of His Son, our Savior Jesus Christ. Obedience to God is not a prerequisite to be loved by God and accepted by Him. Obedience to God is the grateful, loving response of children who know we are loved and accepted by our Heavenly Father.

Do you see that? God's love for you and His acceptance of you do not depend on your performance. It is all about grace that comes free of charge to people who don't deserve it and never will.

Now, the imperative: “As God’s children” – because you are God’s children through faith in Jesus Christ – “do not conform to the evil desires you had when you lived in ignorance” of the gospel. There was a time, Peter says, when you lived in spiritual darkness and unbelief, before you understood and embraced the gospel, and came to know and believe in Jesus Christ as the true Son of God, Savior of sinners, and Lord of your life. Now that you are in Christ and Christ is in you, your life has to reflect the change that has taken place. You have to kiss the old life good-bye.

Can you hear in Peter’s words here the echo of Paul’s melody in Romans 12:2, where he says: “Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind.” These two verses – Romans 12:2 and 1 Peter 1:14 – are the only places where this particular verb (*suschematizomai*) is used in the New Testament.

The Message expresses verse 14 this way: “Don’t lazily slip back into those old grooves of evil, doing just what you feel like doing.” For Romans 12:2, it has: “Don’t become so well-adjusted to your culture that you fit into it without even thinking.” J.B Phillips famously paraphrased Romans 12:2: “Don’t let the world squeeze you into its mold.”

Peter and Paul are both saying the same thing: Don’t let the values of “the world” dictate or shape your values. Don’t permit the poison of immorality (which is easier to pick up than COVID-19) to pollute your soul. Don’t allow sinful desires to control you or govern the way you live. Or, to put it another way, don’t live your life in a way that contradicts what you say you believe and who you claim to be (a child of God). To say it yet another way, as followers of Jesus, we are to control our desires rather than being controlled by them. You can’t do it by yourself. I can’t do it by myself. We need the help of the Holy Spirit to do it. The good news is that His help is available and His enabling power is enough. Even when it is hard. As it sometimes is. Turn to Him and trust Him in this moment. Then the next. Then the next. One moment at a time.

So, here is today’s first principle for holy living: “Do not conform to the evil desires you had” before God’s saving grace changed your life.

Here is #2:

LIVE A LIFE OF HOLINESS

In a sense, this is the positive side of the imperative just stated in verse 14. Stated negatively, it is: “Do not conform” any longer “to the evil desires” that once ruled your life. It is stated positively in verses 15 and 16: “But just as He who called you is holy, so be holy in all you do; for it is written: “Be holy, because I (the Lord your God) am holy.” This call to holy living is taken from the Old Testament Book of Leviticus, where it is repeated several times (see 11:44, 45; 19:2; and 20:26). Just as God called the people of Israel to be holy, He calls us – His adopted children, the followers of Jesus – to be holy in all we do, because He who called us to Himself is holy.

The root meaning of the word “holy” (*hagios* in Greek) is “set apart.” When we talk about the holiness of God, we are talking about His absolutely perfect moral purity, as well as His transcendent other-ness, His different-ness from everything in the created universe. God is set apart from everyone and everything by virtue of both His total moral perfection and His different-ness as the Creator, Sustainer, and Sovereign over all things in the created order.

For us, the call to be holy involves being set apart by God and for God to serve God’s purposes. Holiness involves being different from the world around us in our values, attitudes, and priorities in life. It involves being different from people around us in the way we think and speak and act. Not for the sake of being different, as if just being different is the point. It is not. And not for the sake of calling attention to ourselves. The different-ness to which Jesus calls us as His followers is not for the purpose of saying to others: “Hey, look at me! Look at us!”

No. We are to be different, yes. For the sake of Jesus. For the spreading of His fame. For the glory of God. For the honor of His name. For the cause of the gospel, which is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes (Romans 1:16).

Holiness, as Mother Teresa said, is “conforming to the character of God.” That is what holiness looks like. It looks like the character of God reflected in the lives of ordinary saints like you and me. Will we ever attain holiness? Not in this life. But still God calls us to live a holy life, and He gives us the grace and power to do it through the saving work of His Son and the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit, who comes to take up residence in the life of every believer. If you belong to Jesus through faith in Him, the Holy Spirit is not only with you, He lives in you.

To “be holy in all you do” is to recognize that your whole life belongs to God. To “be holy” is to live your life in a way that reflects the life and character of God, by letting God have His way in you. As it says in *The Message*: “Let your life be shaped by God’s life, a life energetic and blazing with holiness.”

Before moving on, there are two more things I need to say about holiness. The first is this: You may wonder: “What’s the big deal about holiness? Why is it so important?” Here is the answer: It is a big deal because God says it is a big deal. It is a big deal because living a life of holiness that reflects and reveals God’s character pleases God. It is a big deal because the Bible says: “Without holiness no one will see the Lord” (Hebrews 12:14). This doesn’t mean moral perfection, or there is no hope for any of us. It does mean being set apart by God and for God. It does mean living a life of obedience to God as a sign of our faith in Him and an expression of our gratefulness to Him for His grace to us. It is a big deal because, as it says in Hebrews 12:15, God does not want any of us to miss out on the grace of God, nor does He want us to let any bitter root (root of bitterness) grow up in our lives to cause trouble or bring harm to others. Holy living pleases God.

The second is this: The call to holy living is not about being “holier-than-thou.” Setting yourself up as “holier-than-whomever” is not a pretty sight. Jesus is not impressed by the games we play to prove how holy we are. He sees right through our self-righteousness, just as He saw through the self-promotion of the Pharisee in Luke 18 who wanted everyone to know what a devout, righteous, holy man he was. True holiness is inseparable from genuine humility. To the extent that you think you are superior to others, you lack the kind of holiness that God desires.

On to principle #3.

LIVE AS STRANGERS HERE ON EARTH

It is found in verse 17, where Peter says: “Since you call on a Father who judges each person’s work impartially, live your lives as strangers here in reverent fear.”

As attractive and enticing as this world is, with all the pleasure and enjoyment it offers, as attached as we become to it, this world is not our home. Our life here is temporary. It is a temporary assignment, but it has implications for all eternity. Like Abraham among others, we are “aliens and strangers on earth ... longing for a better country – a heavenly one” (Hebrews 11:13, 16).

Peter emphasizes this idea of being aliens and strangers in this world. He mentions it in the very first verse of this letter (1:1). He mentions it again here in 1:17. He will mention it again in 2:11, where he says: “Dearly beloved, I urge you, as aliens and strangers in the world, to abstain from sinful desires, which war against your soul.” It is reminiscent of what he has already said in verse 14, in urging his readers then and now not to give in to the evil desires that once ruled our lives. Instead, as he goes on to say in 2:12, as followers of Jesus, we are to “live such good lives among unbelievers that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day of His visitation.”

Do you know what I think? I think Peter was paying attention to Jesus. I think he was listening when, in the Sermon on the Mount and probably on other occasions, too, Jesus said: “Let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven” (Matthew 5:16). Peter heard what Jesus said. He remembered. He *got* it! He internalized it. And he passed it on to the believers to whom this letter was written.

This world is not our home. It is not our final destination. I am grateful to be a citizen of the USA, as flawed as our nation is. But my highest allegiance and loyalty in life are to a King and a kingdom greater than the USA or any nation on the face of the earth. Paul speaks to this in Philippians 3:20, where he says that our citizenship is in heaven, from which we eagerly await the coming again of our Savior, the Lord, Jesus Christ. We long for the day to come when, as Paul says in Philippians 2:10-11, every knee everywhere in the whole creation will bow before Him, and every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. Lord, let it be so! Bring it on!

As aliens and strangers on this planet, we are to live our lives here *in reverent fear*. The fear Peter has in mind is not the kind that terrorizes or traumatizes your soul. It is not the kind of fear that can paralyze your mind or soul. It is not the fear of enemies who, as Jesus said in Luke 12:4, can kill the body but after that can do nothing more. Not the fear of the Taliban or Al-Qaeda. Not the fear of COVID or natural disasters. No. What Peter has in mind is a proper attitude of reverent awe and respect for God, recognizing who He is, giving Him praise not only for His grace, mercy, and love, but also for His holiness, His majesty and sovereign power, living “with a deep consciousness of God” (1:17, *MSG*) at every moment.

In such a time as this, at all times and in all things, we must not forget who God is and what He is like. We must not forget that by His grace we belong to God. As Peter tells us in verses 18 and 19, “It was not with perishable things like silver or gold” that we were redeemed by God and set free from the emptiness and futility of life without God, “but with the precious blood of Christ,” the perfect lamb of God who came to take away the sin of the world. We belong to Him. And we are not yet home.

The fourth and final imperative is in verse 22:

LOVE ONE ANOTHER DEEPLY, FROM THE HEART

Holy living in a post-9/11 world – holy living in any age – requires that we love one another. Our model in loving one another is Jesus Himself, who said: “Love one another as I have loved you” (John 13:34). How did Jesus love? Selflessly. Sacrificially. Generously. Extravagantly. Unconditionally.

This imperative to love is so basic, so foundational, so necessary that Peter repeats it in 4:8: “Above all,” he says, “love each other deeply, because love covers a multitude of sins.” Once again, we see that Peter and Paul are on the same page. With each other and with Jesus. Paul says in Romans 12:9: “Love must be sincere.” In *The Message*, it says: “Love from the center of who you are.” No hypocrisy. No phoniness. No pretending. No just for show. Like the love of Jesus for us, our love for one another is to be the real thing.

Peter is saying we must “love one another as if (our) lives depended on it” (1 Peter 1:22; 4:8, *MSG*). Because maybe, just maybe, they do. In these extraordinary times, we need each other. We need love and support and encouragement and patience and forgiveness and grace from one another.

So let’s renew our commitment to love each other deeply, from the heart. Let’s love each other with a love that is genuine, caring, forbearing, forgiving, gracious, even sacrificial. Like the love of Jesus for us. Not just with words (though words do matter) but with actions and in truth (1 John 3:18).

* * * * *

Some things in life are too important to forget. Among them are these imperatives for holy living in such a time as this:

1. Get your mind in gear and stay alert to what is happening and to what God is doing in the world.
2. Live a life of godly self-control under the influence of the Holy Spirit.
3. Set your hope fully on the grace of God to be revealed when Jesus returns.
4. Do not conform to the evil desires that once governed your life.
5. Live a life of holiness.
6. Live your life as aliens and strangers here on earth, knowing that this world is not your home.
7. Live a life of love: Love one another deeply, in the same way that Jesus loved – and loves – you.

As Jesus said to His disciples after He washed their feet: “Now that you know these things, you will be blessed if you do them” (John 13:17).

May it be so in us, to the glory of God. Amen.