

“Purified”

*Zechariah 13:9; 1 Peter 1:13-16, 22-25;
1 Peter 2:9-10*

Tested by fire. Refined by fire.

Fire is a prevalent image in the Bible. Fire refines, as when a metal is heated, melts, and the impurities float to the top. Fire also burns away what is not needed and even harms, as when we burn away brush to improve forest health. So also, we are often melted down in the chaos and confusion of life, enabling us to move forward in holiness, for as Peter writes, you must be holy in every aspect of your life (v. 15). Too often we shirk away from words such as these, but we must not. To give up on holiness is to give up on Christ.



Holy?

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

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

If the word “holy” makes you feel intimidated, substitute “virtuous.” Growing in holiness requires us to develop better habits, moral habits, holy habits, aka virtues. Developing habits of compassion reorients our hearts so that we seek compassion. Developing habits of kindness reorients our hearts, so that we are reflexively kind. If I always must stop and think about being kind, there is a good chance I often will not be. Paul urges the believers in Philippi toward a virtuous life, becoming people of good character, for he knows that the virtues reflect the character of God. In his letter to the Galatians, Paul lists some fruit of the Holy Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. Such is the character of Jesus and it is to be our character as well.

The first to go

I think that Dr. Perkins may help us to answer another question raised in 1 Peter: what does holiness have to do with hope?

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

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

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

What is a disciple?

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

How do we learn?

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

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

Exiles in a foreign land

Peter helps us to remember who we are, i.e., into whom God has made us. We have been “born anew . . . through the loving and enduring word of God” (1:23). And the truth is that we do live as “exiles” (v. 17) in this world. We know that we are to be the light of the world, the city on the hill (Matthew 5:14), yet we are more than a bit like strangers in a strange land. Becoming more like Jesus necessarily means that we will fit less well into a world that does not know him.

Peter, like the rest of the New Testament writers, wants us to grasp the larger vision of God’s work in this world and our place in his work. Disciplined and holy living are how we can live the glorious new life God has given us, how we can truly be evermore Christlike. It is how we learn to be faithful; even better . . . how we become faithful to the God who loves us.

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

In it together

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

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

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

The Holiness of God

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

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

Allen Coppedge helps us to see that just as it takes many differing portraits to adequately portray God (take Good Shepherd and Loving Father, to name two), so it takes several ideas to try to capture what we mean by God’s holiness. The biblical portrait of God as creator tends to emphasize the separateness of God as a key aspect of his holiness, while the portrait of God as a shepherd emphasizes holiness as goodness.

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

Daily Bible Readings - Read 1 Peter in its entirety each week, followed by a psalm on Saturday.

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| Monday | 1 Peter 1 | A living hope |
| Tuesday | 1 Peter 2 | A chosen people, called to serve |
| Wednesday | 1 Peter 3 | Living as exiles, part 1 |
| Thursday | 1 Peter 4 | Living as exiles, part 2 |
| Friday | 1 Peter 5 | Tending God’s flock |
| Saturday | Psalm 99 | Praising God for his holiness |