

Being Holy, Not Holier Than Thou

1 Peter 1:13-16

Introduction - A Topic We Avoid

This morning, and for a few weeks to come, we're looking at a topic which is not particularly easy and could be challenging for us. Peter in his letter here calls upon his readers, which includes us, to be holy. A little while back I was reading through some documents which a church used to describe itself. The church declared that it was welcoming, loving, affirming, safe, working for justice, etc., etc. I found it interesting that the church sought to avoid using the adjective 'holy'. 'Holy' is one of the most common adjectives used to describe the people of God in both the Old and New Testaments. You may know that Paul would often start his letters addressing the 'saints' in a particular location. 'Saint' means 'holy one'. Both the Apostles Creed and the Nicene Creed talk about the Holy Church.

If holy is such a common word in the Bible and in church history, why is it that the word has fallen out of use in many churches? There's probably a number of reasons but I can think of three easy ones:

First, many Christians don't know what 'holy' means and so we find it confusing. If we've visited a Roman Catholic Church we may have seen 'holy water' out the front and we wonder how it became holy. Did something magical happen to it? I remember visiting Charters Towers with the family and they had a set up to demonstrate panning for gold. A gentleman there helpfully pointed out that I didn't have to be worried about my daughters getting sick from the water they were playing in because it was holy water ... because they boiled the hell out of it! Let me quickly clear up the meaning of 'holy' for us. 'Holy' means set apart and has the idea that something or someone is set apart from evil or even just common things in the world and set apart for God and for God's use. We'll look more at what it means for us to be holy later and in coming weeks but it's enough to say here that being holy means that a person is committed to God and being used for God's purposes.

Second, some Christians have earned us a bad reputation for believing that they're better than other people. Here this idea is that people considered themselves 'Holier than thou' (I'm holier than you) which can basically be taken to mean the same thing as 'I'm a better person than you!' We are now well aware of how often Christians and the church have failed and so we are inclined to avoid words which give the impression that we believe that we're better.

Connect to this, the third reason some churches today avoid using the word 'holy' to describe themselves or their members and that is because churches want to be welcoming and don't want to turn people off from coming. If we were to say that we are to be holy, different from the world around us, perhaps that would make some people uncomfortable about coming to church?

I've already given us a brief definition of 'holy' to address the first concern as to why the word holy isn't used and thus hopefully help us to use the word correctly. I will seek to address the other two concerns through the rest of the message. I pray that we will be willing to use the word holy and indeed strive to humbly be holy.

Based On Work Already Done (v. 13)

Turning to the passage read for us, we have to apply an important principle of biblical interpretation. The principle is this, when you see a 'therefore' you have to see what it is there for. I don't mean to sound like an English teacher but we need to remember that the word therefore ties what follows to the preceding thought in a causative way. In verses 13 we read, "Therefore, with minds that are alert and fully sober, set your hope on the grace to be brought to you when Jesus Christ is revealed at his coming."

Remembering back to previous weeks, we know that earlier Peter was describing the great work of God in rescuing us through the coming of the Messiah who died and rose again. So it is on the basis of that wonderful blessing that we are to be alert and thinking clearly to focus on the hope of when Jesus returns. It is this clear-thinking hope which Peter uses as the basis for the holy obedient life which he calls his readers to live.

Peter's teaching here addresses the concern that some churches have in using the word holy, that some Christians have taken the attitude towards holiness that they are holier than others and thus used holiness as a weapon to put others down and for them to feel better about themselves. This thinking essentially uses holiness, evidenced by certain behaviour, as something which can be measured to show that some people are more deserving of God's love, care and forgiveness than others. In contrast to such thinking Peter makes it clear that his call for people to live lives of obedience to God is completely based upon the work which God has already done for us. We are already people who have God's approval and thus have a hope for when Jesus returns. For Peter, and all the Bible writers, holiness and obedience is commanded of those who are already God's people.

The importance of this is almost impossible to overstate. We do not strive to be holy or be obedient to earn God's approval. It is because we are already accepted by God as his people and we have already been approved before God because of what Jesus has done for us, that we are now called to live holy and obedient lives.

If there are churches which are reluctant to use the language of holiness because there are people who see themselves as "holier than thou," then the problem is not with the word holy but with those people failing to understand the gospel in the first place.

Governed By Our New Identity (vv. 14-16)

Continuing with the passage, we next read, "As obedient children, do not conform to the evil desires you had when you lived in ignorance. But just as he who called you is holy, so be holy in all you do; for it is written: 'Be holy, because I am holy.'"

Here Peter addresses the other concern which some churches have about using the word holy, that being that we want to be welcoming and some people may be turned off if we say and act like we're different from the world. In contrast to being concerned about turning people off, Peter says, "You're to act different from the world around you because you are different!"

We can say two things to address the concern that some people may be turned off from the church by us using the word holy. First, as noted, Peter would declare that it's important that we live true to who we now are in Christ and as God's children. Christians, we who find our identity in Jesus, are God's children and this marks us off as unique. Peter goes on to explicitly tell his readers not to forget who they truly are, saying, "do not conform to the evil desires you had when you lived in ignorance." Peter's readers now knew who God is and what his character was like and not only that they had become part of God's family. It was wrong for them to return to how they acted when they were ignorant of such matters.

The second way this concern can be addressed, and this is something which Peter will touch on at various times in this letter, is that real holiness, a holiness which is grounded in the humble knowledge that our position as God's children is all based on what has been achieved for us by Jesus, and a holiness which displays God's character and care to others as we show ourselves to be aligned with God, does actually make us attractive for outsiders. When churches refuse to call people to holiness because we fear that we may make outsiders feel uncomfortable or unwelcome then really we make ourselves indistinguishable from the world. This in turn damages any message we have to share. How can we speak with humble boldness as to who Jesus is when our lives don't display Jesus' character? How can we talk of being God's children when our lives don't demonstrate that we are God's children? How can we share the difference Jesus makes when our lives indicate that we are no different from others or from who we used to be?

Conclusion

I pray that this message has helped us to see why churches should use the word holy. When holiness is correctly understood it should drive us to the gospel because we know that we can't be holy without first receiving the work of what God has done for us in Jesus. The call to holiness is never to be a source of pride for people but rather a prompt to give humble thanks for what has been done for us to

make us God's children. Then, as God's children, it's important that we live that way. While this will indeed mark us off as unique from the world, we should not fear that living a holy life will make people uncomfortable and unwelcome, but rather be trusting that living a holy life will help validate the truth of our message and make us more winsome to outsiders as we show the truth of the hope we profess.

The call to be holy is the cry of heaven and lets consider this as we sing that the Lord would shape us for his glory.