

BE DIFFERENT IN A GOOD WAY**1 PETER 1:13 – 2:3**

“Holy... holiness....” What comes into your mind when you hear those words? Probably because of my own religious background, those words bring up some pretty powerful associations. I grew up in a church environment that was both Pentecostal and Holiness. The Holiness tradition highly values being separate and distinct from everything that might be considered sinful or worldly. A lot of emphasis is put on avoiding outward activities that are common among non-Christians. Like what? When I was growing up, the use of playing cards for any reason was frowned upon because of its association with gambling. You were never expected to be seen in a movie theatre or even a bowling alley. Those were considered to be godless places where godless people went to pursue godless entertainment. Boys and girls were discouraged from ever swimming together because of the potential for lustful thoughts. Women were discouraged from wearing any sort of make-up, jewelry or pants. As you can imagine, those in the Holiness tradition can very easily become legalistic and judgmental towards those who don't buy into their code of behavior. The Holiness tradition tends to emphasize staying away from non-Christians because of the risk of their ungodly influence rather than intentionally making friends with them in order to share the good news about Jesus. Now, to be fair, there are some wonderful, godly people in the Holiness tradition, but often how they express their faith looks more negative than positive, more odd than attractive, and more weird than inviting. Be that as it may, I suspect that most people in our culture have a strong discomfort with the words “holy” or “holiness”, even if they've had little to do with Holiness Christians. For example, when you describe someone as “holier-than-thou”, it's not meant as a compliment!

Now, the word “holy” is all over the Bible. We sing that word a lot in hymns and praise songs. The Bible says God is holy. What it means is that God is different than human beings in some very important, positive and wonderful ways. The Bible says followers of Jesus should be holy. That means you and I should be wonderfully, positively and attractively different in several key areas of our lives. Different from whom? Different from those who don't follow Jesus. Not weird, but different. Not strange, but distinct. Not in a negative way, but in an attractive way. When the question is asked, “Are you holy?” another way to ask that question biblically is, “Are you different in a good way?”

Now, last week we began a spiritual journey through the New Testament book of 1 Peter. It was written by Simon Peter, one of Jesus' twelve disciples. It was written to some of the first followers of Jesus in what is now the country of Turkey just a few decades after Jesus rose from the dead and went back to Heaven. One of Peter's main themes was standing strong in the storms of life. The specific storm they were dealing with back then was religious persecution. Peter wrote to encourage them to hang in there with the Lord. As we listen in on this conversation, we can learn a great deal about how to stand strong in the storms of our own lives. No, we probably aren't being persecuted for our faith in Jesus, but Peter's Holy Spirit-inspired wisdom applies to more than just the storm of persecution. It's good for any storm that might blow up and into your life. Let's look at the portion of 1 Peter for today now.

If you want to develop the God-given ability to stand strong in the storms of life, it will require from you the willingness to be different and distinct – in other words, to be holy. Peter describes here what that difference or distinction might look like. Obviously, God doesn't want us to look or act so differently from those who aren't Jesus' followers that we alienate and repel them. That's one problem with the Holiness tradition in my humble estimation. On the other hand, if we're just identical to people who could care less about Jesus, than what's the point in following Jesus at all? The first area of difference or distinction that I see in Peter's words is...

A DIFFERENT MINDSET

Peter says, "So prepare your minds for action...." (1 Pt 1:13 NLT) In other words, a follower of Jesus needs to have a well-ordered mind. When it comes to the great questions about life, Christians ought to be the ones least satisfied with cheap answers. It's people without Jesus who really haven't thought much about life and how to make sense of it. Nine out of ten non-Christians have no rational reason to live life the way they do. They just kind of go along with the crowd. Another aspect of getting a well-ordered mind is realizing that our brains need some reprogramming because we're sinful. Every one of us here today has got some wrong ideas about God, about how to live life, about relationships, about storms or trials in life, about just about everything! As a devoted follower of Jesus, you need to be constantly reading the Bible, listening to and talking with other believers, and thinking long and hard about all the many issues of life and living. Why? Someone has said, "Your outlook determines your outcome." How you look at life – your perspective – will profoundly affect how you live your life.

In that same verse, Peter continues, "So prepare your minds for action and exercise self-control...." (1 Pt 1:13 NLT). In addition to a well-ordered mind, you're called to have a well-disciplined life. God has very set ideas on the best way to live life. His intent is always to enrich your life not spoil your fun. There are many things God wants us to do because He is holy – because He is different. Like what? Like putting Him first in every area of your life... like honoring your parents... like serving your spouse in a godly way... like taking the initiative to reach out to people who are curious about Jesus – just to name a few of them. There are also many things God is against because He is holy – because He is different. Like what? Like racism, like sex outside of marriage, like loving money and the things money can buy, like a bad, abusive temper, like ignoring the poor – just to name a few. When Peter says to be self-controlled here, he really means to be God-controlled. If your life is controlled by self rather than God, you have a mess on your horizon. If you're going to be different like God is different, then you need to be for what He is for and be against what He's against. You will need to invite the Holy Spirit to point out where you're out of God's control so He will give you the power and ability to get under His control.

An Army sergeant tried for 25 years to quit smoking. After many, many failed attempts, he went in for his yearly medical exam with an Army doctor. The doctor told him that his health was being severely harmed by smoking and that he should stop. The sergeant confessed that he knew he should stop and went on to relate how many times he'd tried

to stop smoking over the years. He'd given up in despair. The doctor looked at him and said, "What are these two bars on my lapel?" The sergeant replied, "They mean that you're a captain." "Yes, and they also mean I outrank you," said the doctor. "I'm giving you a direct order to stop smoking." Do you know, that worked! That sergeant went home and never smoked another cigarette. He couldn't quit on his own, even after years of trying. But he could quit when he understood the power of a direct order from a superior officer. He'd been thoroughly indoctrinated by the United States Army and was, therefore, unwilling to disobey an order. Your spiritual and all-of-life Commander-in-Chief, the risen Lord Jesus Christ, has given us many commands in the Bible. When we take them as seriously as that sergeant took his doctor's order to quit smoking, we'll be surprised at how God can transform our lives.

Again, Peter says, "So prepare your minds for action and exercise self-control. Put all your hope in the gracious salvation that will come to you when Jesus Christ is revealed to the world." (1 Pt 1:13 NLT) Yes, you need a well-ordered mind, a well-disciplined life and, also, a well-defined goal. People who don't follow Jesus usually pursue wrong or unworthy goals. They pursue wealth, positions in life of power and influence, various achievements, staying healthy, or ensuring a comfortable retirement. Those become the "be and end all" of life. Others have vague goals. For instance, they might pursue happiness or success, but they aren't sure what those are or how to get there. It's all sort of foggy to say the least. But a follower of Jesus has a well-defined goal. Peter says that every Christian's goal is experiencing God's gracious salvation in all of its many dimensions. He wants to please God in everything. She wants God to use her in some way to advance His influence in this world. He wants God to use him to reach people who don't follow Jesus yet. She wants to be a channel of God's grace to others. It means knowing and serving God both in this life and then for all eternity. That becomes all important, primary, first for a devoted follower of Jesus. Put "all your eggs in that basket" for this life and eternity. A second area of difference or distinction is...

A DIFFERENT SET OF VALUES.

It's not that all of our values have to be different from those who don't follow Jesus. All of us can value the importance of families, hard work, loving our country, or the importance of being honest and kind. But there ought to be very clear, distinct differences in key areas. First of all, there is a very different set of values about how any person finds and maintains a relationship with God. Many who don't follow Jesus think having a relationship with God is either impossible or unimportant. Others think you can earn or deserve a relationship with God by being a good person or trying really hard to be a good person. Since a relationship with God depends on how good a person you are, very few of them believe you can ever be certain that you're going to Heaven. It's all a big mystery that depends on how God "grades" your goodness. You find out when you're dead and for now you just muddle through the best you can!

As a follower of Jesus, your values in this area are very different. Look again at what Peter says here. "For you know that God paid a ransom to save you from the empty life you inherited from your ancestors. And it was not paid with mere gold or silver,

which lose their value. It was the precious blood of Christ, the sinless, spotless Lamb of God. God chose him as your ransom long before the world began.... Through Christ you have come to trust in God. And you have placed your faith and hope in God because he raised Christ from the dead and gave him great glory.” (1 Pt 1:18-21 NLT) So, who took the initiative to re-establish an eternal relationship with God? God did. You didn’t seek Him first; He sought you out first. So, when did God come up with this plan to send His Son, Jesus, to die on a cross and be raised again to pay the penalty for your sin and mine? Before He even created the world.

The Devil successfully tempted Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden which then released this awful thing called sin into the world. Didn’t that surprise God? No. He already knew it would happen and had the perfect answer for it already planned out. God already knew that your goodness and mine would never be good enough. His standard is perfection. How did Peter put it here? “But now you must be holy in everything you do, just as God who chose you is holy. For the Scriptures say, ‘You must be holy because I am holy.’” (1 Pt 1:15-16 NLT) So, followers of Jesus know a relationship with God is a gift only God can give not something you earn or deserve by trying extra hard to be good. This gift – like any true gift – is offered freely to you and me. But it was very costly to God. It cost Him the blood of His Son, Jesus.

When Jeffrey Ebert was five years old – before factory-installed seatbelts and airbags - his family was driving home at night on a two-lane country road. Jeffrey was sitting on his mom’s lap when another car, driven by a drunk driver, swerved into their lane and hit their car head-on. Jeffrey has no memory of the collision. But he does recall the fear and confusion he felt as he saw himself covered with blood from head to toe. Then, he learned that the blood wasn’t his, but his mother’s. In that split second when the two oncoming headlights glared into her eyes, she instinctively pulled Jeffrey closer to her chest and curled her body around his. It was her body that slammed against the dashboard. It was her head that shattered the windshield. It was she that took the impact of the collision so that Jeffrey wouldn’t have to. As hard as it is to believe, Jeffrey’s mom survived although extensive surgeries were required for her to recover. In a similar, but infinitely more significant way, Jesus took the full impact of your sin and mine and it is His blood that permanently covers our lives in a spiritual sense. When it comes to finding and maintaining a relationship with God, He did it all.

There is, secondly, a very different set of values about how to get the most out of life. A person who has no interest in following Jesus can’t help but approach all of life selfishly and self-centeredly. Why? Because he believes the meaning of life is found in fulfilling his own dreams and ambitions. Or, she believes fulfillment in life is found in what she can achieve or produce. A follower of Jesus looks at this very differently: you get the most out of life when you serve God not yourself. Peter puts it like this, “...So you must live in reverent fear of him during your time here as ‘temporary residents.’” (1 Pt 1:17 NLT) What is “reverent fear”? It doesn’t mean being afraid or terrified. Instead, you just approach living out your life with a different set of values. Life is not about you and what you want to do. Life is about God and what He wants to do and how and where you fit into it. In addition, if you’re a follower of Jesus, this planet, the way it is now, is

not your real home. That's the new Heaven and the new Earth where we will spend eternity with God and all those who love and serve Him. You're a bit of an alien here and now. You're different. You're distinct. You don't fit in. You're not supposed to.

Linda Clare works some very long hours as a childcare provider. She was tempted often to complain about her job. Although she didn't know at the time what kind of work God wanted her to do in life, she was sure it must be something other than "just" childcare. Then one day, a father who came to pick up his toddler at her home commented, "You taught Kasey to pray. Now she says grace at home before we eat. My wife and I are thinking of attending church now." God's direction suddenly became much clearer for Linda. Now, when others ask what she does for a living, she smiles and says, "I just babysit for the Lord." How are you living out your life? Why do you do whatever it is you do? Who are you living your life for – yourself? Or God? Now, here's a third and final category of difference of distinction between followers of Jesus and those who don't follow Jesus. If you're a follower of Jesus, you're called to identify with:

A DIFFERENT SET OF PEOPLE.

First, this is a group of people who have experienced the same kind of birth as you. Peter says here, "For you have been born again, but not to a life that will quickly end. Your new life will last forever because it comes from the eternal, living word of God." (1 Pt 1:23 NLT) The Bible says you need to make friendships with fellow Christians and non-Christians. It's not an either/or but a both/and situation! You make friends with those who don't follow Jesus because every human being is precious to God, every person is someone for whom Jesus died, and you want the privilege of pointing him or her to Jesus. By the token, you need to establish rich friendships with those who have the same Heavenly Father that you do, and serve and love the same Jesus, and have the same Holy Spirit kind of life flowing in and through them. That makes you distinct.

Second, you need to identify with a group of people who enjoy the same nourishment. Peter says, "...Your new life will last forever because it comes from the eternal, living word of God.... Like newborn babies, you must crave pure spiritual milk so that you will grow into a full experience of salvation. Cry out for this nourishment, now that you have had a taste of the Lord's kindness." (1 Pt 1:23, 2:2-3 NLT) Followers of Jesus share an unusual relationship with the Bible, God's Word. They desire it; they crave it; they want it all of the time; they never get enough of it; they hunger and thirst for it – like a baby craves milk. The Bible isn't just a book of helpful suggestions to us. No, it's the operating manual for all life and living. That's why we listen to it preached in worship services. That's why we discuss it in Sunday Bible classes and weeknight small groups. That's why we read it, meditate on it and obey it on our own in our everyday lives.

Third, you need to identify with a set of people who express the same love. Peter says, "...So now you must show sincere love to each other as brothers and sisters. Love each other deeply with all your heart." (1 Pt 1:22 NLT) George Barna has done professional and extensive research on people who don't go to church. What do you think is the most common answer he gets as to why an unchurched person decides to start going to

church regularly? The pastor's great messages? The best youth or children's program ever offered? The quality of the music? Nope! It's how much the people in the church care about one another. Imagine that! It's just like Jesus said, "Your love for one another will prove to the world that you are my disciples." (John 13:35 NLT)

So, why do you think Peter had to remind these Christians to love each other deeply from the heart? Probably because he'd been around church for a few years! Christians can be an ornery, imperfect bunch. We can hurt each other's feelings. We can have ugly conflicts and disagreements with one another. We can step on each other's toes. Believe me, you've got to make up your mind to love other followers of Jesus from the heart. You've got to make it intentional, because it will get tested. Listen to me, church! Good things are happening in our church, but remember to love each other deeply from the heart. The devil just loves to mess up relationships as a way to mess us up and slow us down as a church. Remember to love each other deeply from the heart. You can't avoid every conflict, but you sure can resolve it the right way. Be humble and approachable. Give each other the benefit of the doubt. Forgive. Reach out to those who are hurting or going through a time of loss. Stand next to them as they try to stand strong in the storms of life. Remember to love each other deeply from the heart.

When Craig Barnes was a child, his pastor father brought home a 12 year old boy named Roger one day, whose parents had died from a drug overdose. There was absolutely no one else to take care of Roger, so Craig's folks decided they'd just raise him as if he were one of their own sons. At first, it was pretty difficult for Roger to adjust to his new home – an environment free of heroin-addicted adults! Every day, several times every day, Craig heard his parents say to Roger, "No, no. That's not how we behave in this family. No, no, you don't have to scream, fight or hurt other people to get what you want, Roger. No, no, Roger, we expect you to show respect in this family." Slowly, ever so slowly, Roger began to change. Did he have to make all those changes in order to become a part of the Barnes family? No. He was made a part of the family simply by the grace of Craig's father. But, did Roger then have to do a lot of hard work because he was in this new family? You bet he did! It was tough for him to change. It took time and it wasn't easy. But he was motivated by the gratitude he felt for the incredible love he'd received from the Barnes family. Sometimes, new followers of Jesus have a lot of hard work to do after they get adopted into God's forever family. You don't do the work to become a son or daughter of your Heavenly Father. No, instead you make those changes because you're already His son or daughter. And every time you start to revert back to your old life, the Holy Spirit will come alongside you and say, "No, no, no. That's not how we act in this new family of God."

What does it mean to be holy? What's holiness? It's having a different mindset, a different set of values, and identifying with a different set of people. God does indeed call you and me to be different and distinct in a good way from those who have no interest in following Jesus. Being able to stand strong in the storms of life God's way also demands that you live with a different mindset, a different set of values and that you identify with a different set of people. That's what it means to be different. That's what it means to be holy even as your Father in Heaven is holy.