

Trinity Baptist Church
Sunday 9th January 2022
1 Peter 1:15-16 Be holy because I am holy

I'm speaking today on our text for 2022, which is 1 Peter 1:15-16: **"But just as he who called you is holy, so be holy in all you do; for it is written: 'Be holy, because I am holy.'"** To set that in a wider context I'm going to read from 1 Peter 1:3-21.

[Read 1 Peter 1:3-21]

3Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, 4and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade. This inheritance is kept in heaven for you, 5who through faith are shielded by God's power until the coming of the salvation that is ready to be revealed in the last time. 6In all this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials. 7These 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 honour when Jesus Christ is revealed. 8Though you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and are filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy, 9for you are receiving the end result of your faith, the salvation of your souls.

10Concerning this salvation, the prophets, who spoke of the grace that was to come to you, searched intently and with the greatest care, 11trying to find out the time and circumstances to which the Spirit of Christ in them was pointing when he predicted the sufferings of Christ and the glories that would follow. 12It was revealed to them that they were not serving themselves but you, when they spoke of the things that have now been told you by those who have preached the gospel to you by the Holy Spirit sent from heaven. Even angels long to look into these things.

13Therefore, 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. 14As obedient children, do not conform to the evil desires you had when you lived in ignorance. 15But just as he who called you is holy, so be holy in all you do; 16for it is written: 'Be holy, because I am holy.'

17Since you call on a Father who judges each person's work impartially, live out your time as foreigners here in reverent fear. 18For you know that it was not with perishable things such as silver or gold that you were redeemed from the empty way of life handed down to you from your ancestors, 19but with the precious blood of Christ, a lamb without blemish or defect. 20He was chosen before the creation of the world, but was revealed in these last times for your sake. 21Through him you believe in God, who raised him from the dead and glorified him, and so your faith and hope are in God.

[Pray]

"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.'" I've been a Christian now for 27 years. And if you were to ask me, "What is the biggest change you have seen in the Church in that time?" I would say it is the steady erosion of our focus on holiness. True, there were churches in the past (and probably still are) who were so focused on maintaining a legalistic concept of holiness that they forgot about love and grace. But, in general, I believe that the pendulum has swung too far in the other direction especially in the last two decades.

For, to lose sight of the Church's calling to be distinctively set apart from the ways of the world, to fail to reflect in our behaviour God's character and commands, damages our gospel witness. What have we to offer the world if the Jesus we present is no more than a nice loving man, or if the church is no different from the best social clubs? Christian discipleship is a call to radical life change, and that has always been both its most contentious and most *attractive* feature. The early Church suffered many persecutions, but what continued to attract unbelievers to join them in their droves was the distinctive goodness of their lives. And throughout history, every significant Christian awakening has been preceded by two features: a passionate commitment to prayer, and a sustained re-commitment to *holy* living within the Church. Holiness is missional.

The converse is also true – *unholiness* damages the Church’s witness. Why? Because God is holy. Too many times I’ve heard it said that in the Bible there is only *one* characteristic that is attributed to God, unqualified, as his essential make-up – “God is love.” God *is* love at the core of his being. 1 John 4:8: “Whoever does not love does not know God, because God *is* love.” But that is not the *only* unqualified characteristic given as the very essence of his being. For we read in our passage today that “he who called you *is holy*” (v.15) and God says of himself, “I am *holy*” (v.16). Often in the prophets he calls himself “The Holy One of Israel” or “the Holy God.” Holiness is as much a part of God’s very person as love is. And it is because *he* is holy to the core of his being that his *people* are called to be holy in all they do. For we are called to become like him.

But, before we go any further, it is vital that we notice the order in this passage – and in *all* the New Testament letters! Holiness does not *precede* salvation as though we could earn God’s approval. Holiness *proceeds from* salvation in *response* to all that God has done for us to restore us to himself through Jesus Christ and to make us his own, holy people. And it was ever thus. God commanded Israel, “Be holy because I am holy,” in Leviticus 19:2 and elsewhere, specifically *after* he had covenanted with them to be their God, and they his people. The laws did not *make* them his people; they showed them how to live *as* his people, distinctly from the unbelieving nations around them, as a witness to them of God’s *holy* love. And, likewise, *Christ’s* people are to live holy lives, distinct from the unbelievers around us, as a witness to God’s *holy* love, because we *are* his holy people.

So, Peter begins with an outline of what God has done for us in Christ: “he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead” (v.3) ... “into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade” (v.4) ... “kept in heaven for you, who through faith are shielded by God’s power” (v.5) ... “Though you have not seen him, you love him” ... “you believe in him” ... “and are filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy” (v.8) ... for you are receiving the end result of your faith, the salvation of your souls” (v.9) ... “As obedient children ...” (v.14). It is from the security of knowing that we have *already* been saved, and that God is able to protect us in that salvation to the end, that we can hope to live holy lives. Not to become something we are not, but to live up to what he has already made us. The word “sinner” is actually never used in the New Testament of people *after* they come to faith in Jesus. Instead, they are consistently called “saints” – holy people.

But what do we actually mean by holiness? To answer that, we need first to examine what it means that *God* is holy, since we are to imitate his holiness. I’ve been reading John Stott’s exceptional book, *The Cross of Christ*, and I make no apology that much of what I’m about to say comes from that book. Stott is arguably the most eminent evangelical Christian scholar of the 20th Century, and he looks at holiness from the perspective of why it was necessary for Jesus to *die* in order for us to be forgiven. He quotes from the 11th Century theologian, Anselm, saying “If anybody imagines ... that God can simply forgive us as we forgive others, that person has not yet considered the seriousness of sin.”¹ And he adds: “That God is holy is foundational to biblical religion. So is the corollary that sin is incompatible with his holiness. His eyes are ‘too pure to look on evil’ and he ‘cannot tolerate wrong.’ Therefore our sins effectively separate us from him, so that his face is hidden from us and he refuses to listen to our prayers.”²

That is frightful enough. But God does not merely passively *ignore* our sin. Rather he actively *opposes* it. Stott continues, “Closely related to God’s holiness is his wrath, which is in fact his holy reaction to evil ... Yet the concept of an angry God continues to raise problems in Christian minds. How can an emotion ... which Jesus equated with murder, and which Paul declared to be one of the ‘acts of the sinful nature’ of which we must rid ourselves, possibly be attributed to the all-holy God?”³ His answer is simple: there is a difference between unrighteous anger, uncontrolled and arbitrary, which humans often display, and righteous anger, which is always controlled and principled, a reaction of opposition to evil. So, Leon Morris describes God’s wrath as his, “‘personal divine revulsion to evil’ and his ‘personal vigorous opposition’ to it.”⁴ Such anger is pure and holy because evil is so hurtful and destructive.

¹ John Stott, *The Cross of Christ*, p.88

² *Ibid*, p.102

³ *Ibid*, p.103

⁴ *Ibid*, p.105

Stott lists five vivid biblical metaphors which underline how incompatible sin is with God's holiness. First there is height. Frequently, God is described as "The Most High God" or "The LORD Most High." Height conveys both his sovereignty over all things and his inaccessibility to sinful humanity. When humans sought to scale that height by their own efforts, for example, by building the Tower of Babel, God thwarted them, in that case by confusing their language.

Closely related to this, is the second metaphor of distance. Many times, biblical characters are commanded to keep their distance from God. "Do not come any closer," God said to Moses in Exodus 3:5. "Take off your sandals, for the place where you are standing is *holy ground*." Before he appeared on Mount Sinai, he first commanded Moses, "Put limits for the people around the mountain and tell them, 'Be careful that you do not approach the mountain or touch the foot of it. Whoever touches the mountain is to be put to death'" (Exodus 19:12). When the Israelites entered the Promised Land, they were to remain about 900 metres behind the Ark of the Covenant that symbolised God's presence with them (Joshua 3:3). And the whole layout of the Tabernacle and later the Temple was designed to create clear *distance* between the holy God and the unholy people.

The third and fourth metaphors are also closely related to each other, those of unapproachable light and consuming fire. "He wraps himself in light" we sing, quoting Psalm 104:2, and Paul in 1 Timothy 6:16, talks of God "who alone is immortal and who lives in *unapproachable light*, whom no one has seen or can see." Further, Deuteronomy 4:24, quoted in Hebrews 12:29, states, "the LORD your God is a *consuming fire*, a jealous God." Stott writes: "Both [metaphors] discourage, indeed inhibit, too close an approach. Bright light is blinding; our eyes cannot endure its brilliance, and in the heat of the fire everything shrivels up and is destroyed."⁵

But the fifth metaphor is even more dramatic, that of vomiting. Again, Stott writes: "It indicates that the holy God's rejection of evil is as decisive as the human body's rejection of poison by vomiting. Vomiting is probably the body's most violent of all reactions. The immoral and idolatrous practices of the Canaanites were so disgusting, it is written, that 'the land vomited out its inhabitants,' [Leviticus 18:25] and the Israelites were warned that if they committed the same offences, the land would vomit them out as well."⁶ We see the same warning given to the church at Laodicea in Revelation 3:16 – "spit" does not do justice to the original Greek. Stott continues: "The picture may be shocking, but its meaning is clear. God cannot tolerate or 'digest' sin and hypocrisy. They cause him not distaste merely, but disgust. They are so repulsive to him that he must rid himself of them. He must spit or vomit them out."⁷

These metaphors give us a glimpse into just how incompatible sin is with God's holiness, and how hostile he is towards it. And we need him to be that hostile, because otherwise sin would continue to damage God's world, even after it is re-created at the end of time. But therein lies a danger for all of us, because we all sin. And therein lies a problem for God because he is the very definition of love as well as the very definition of holiness. "How, then, could God express his holy love? – his love in forgiving sinners without compromising his holiness, and his holiness in judging sinners without frustrating his love?"⁸ The answer is that God the Son became a human being and willingly took on himself all of God's wrath at sin, as our substitute. That is the price that God was willing to pay for our wrongdoing. But it took no lesser price than that for God to forgive sin, yet remain true to his holy and loving character. This is the beautiful mystery of the Gospel which the Old Testament prophets and the angels each desperately tried to understand, but couldn't. "Amazing love, how can it be, that Thou my God shouldst die for me?"

We can only truly appreciate the worth of the cross if we can accept and own God's "guilty" verdict upon *us* that made his sacrifice so necessary. We have to see there not only God's overwhelming love, but also his uncompromising holiness that refuses to in any way accept or condone sin, yet determines to restore us to himself. It should be a spectacle that brings us to our knees in repentance again and again and again. The prodigal son would have received

⁵ Ibid, p.108

⁶ Ibid, p.108

⁷ Ibid, p.108

⁸ Ibid, p.105

no ring, not robe, no kiss and no feast had he stayed in the far-off country or returned impenitent. Only repentance lets us be welcomed home.

That is why God gives us a conscience, or rather why his Holy Spirit convicts us of sin through our conscience – so that our guilt drives us to him in repentance. Of course, some people have an over-developed conscience; they imagine themselves guilty in ways they are not. But most of us have the opposite problem – we too quickly excuse our sin, so as to avoid the nagging pain of our conscience telling us to face up to it. And the danger is that if we cauterise our conscience for too long (as 1 Timothy 4:2 puts it), we could become deaf to the Holy Spirit's voice and find ourselves the subjects of God's wrath. That is the very opposite of the purpose of Jesus' death which is to make us *holy*. "Be holy, because I am holy," says God. Be what I have made you to be.

But that is not possible unless we share God's hostility towards sin. If our sin does not repulse us, like it repulses God, we will not consistently act to rid ourselves of it. So we should ask God the Holy Spirit to give us a heart like his. For Christ died to make us holy. The same is true corporately. The Church is a community of God's people who covenant together to help one another grow in holiness. But that means that sometimes we need to call one another to repentance. Traditionally, often the church limited such calls to sexual sins only. And holiness in that area is very important. But, much of the context around the verse "Be holy because I am holy" in Leviticus 19 has to do with sins which damage the community. Likewise, much of the rest of Peter's letter has to do with instructions of how to behave to one another – how we submit to authority, how we talk to and about one another, how we bear unjust suffering in a godly way, how we serve one another. These aspects of holiness are just as important, because we are to be holy in *all* we do.

Many of us have spent many months consumed with thinking about covid in one way or another. I suggest that holiness is a far better focus for our thoughts and energy. Let us commit to strive together to be holy, as God is holy. To hate and oppose sin wherever it rears its ugly head and to love one another enough to help each other towards Christlikeness. For if we want a picture of true holiness, it is Jesus Christ's life. Let us, then strive to imitate him in all we do. "Be holy because I am holy" Amen?

[Pray]