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February 27, 2011

"Be Holy For I Am Holy" - God's Call for Holiness

By Teresa Reeve (New Testament Department, SDA Theological Seminary, Andrews University)



It would make a great addition to the [billboard messages from God](#) that sprang up along freeways across the country a few years ago:

“You shall be holy for I am holy.”

Sincerely,

God

This message from [1 Peter 1:16](#)* seems clear and unequivocal, it can be read in a moment while speeding along one’s way, yet it stimulates recurring questions and ruminations that refuse to let us rest. For some, it also stimulates feelings of discouragement and despair as they consider how far they are from attaining to the holiness of God.

What Does This Call Mean?

So what is meant by the call to holiness in 1 Peter? The concept of holiness, expressed by the Greek word, *hagios* and its cognates, is important throughout the epistle. Key to understanding 1 Peter’s use of *hagios* is that, when used of created persons and objects, the word means: “set apart to the divine.” It was thus also employed to describe things and persons considered fit to approach God— those that are “pure” and thus acceptable to Him. *Hagios* is regularly used as the opposite of *koinos* (common).

[1 Peter 1:15-16](#) expresses a non-negotiable call to holiness, involving a change of heart and life. Verse 15 precludes the message

in Peter's own words, calling believers to "be(come) holy in all your behavior." This is not a suggestion but an imperative, and the Greek verb used for be, *ginomai*, indicates not a static state of being but an entrance into a new state, a *becoming*. The central words of verse 16, "Be holy, for I am holy" are quoted directly from Leviticus, where they are repeated several times. In Leviticus, these calls to holiness are elucidated by laws embracing the whole range of human motivation and behavior, from what goes into and touches our own bodies (Lev 11:44)(2), to the nurturing of right/just relationships with others, with God, and with the land (Lev 19:2 and 20:7, 26)(3). Spoken and defined by God Himself, they call for a separation from the death-dealing and God-defying ways natural to humans and practiced in Egypt and in the cultures of Canaan to which they were going.

In the full pericope (4) surrounding the "Be holy" command in 1 Peter, 1 Peter 1:13-21, such set-apartness is something believers are being called to strive for. Verses 14-15 instruct believers not to be conformed to their former desires, that is, to the common ways of this world, but instead to "be holy in all your conduct." As the epistle progresses, we find not just the "big sins" but the common failings such as envy and slander (2:1), the returning of "evil for evil" (3:9), meddling (4:15) and pride (5:5) among the common things that believers are called to leave behind. In their place, similarly to Leviticus, Peter places an emphasis on relationships, instructing believers to honor all people (including the king), love the brothers and sisters, and fear God (2:17).

Looking at Peter's discussion of holiness elsewhere in the epistle, however, we make the joyful discovery that in fact believers in God *already have been* set apart by God as holy. In 1 Peter 2:9 it is declared, "You are ... a royal priesthood, a holy (*hagios*) nation, a people for God's own possession ..." Again Peter's words recall a statement of God to the children of Israel in the wilderness (Exod 19:4-6). Significantly, both this and the "Be holy" imperatives in Leviticus were made only *after* God had already rescued Israel from bondage to the Egyptians and thereby set them apart for Himself—that is, made them holy (see Exod 20:1-3; Lev 20:26). Peter, in fact, alludes to this same historical experience immediately after the call to "Be holy," when he reminds his largely Gentile Christian audience that, "you were redeemed from the futile ways inherited from your forefathers, not with perishable things such as silver or gold, but with the precious blood of Christ" (1 Pet 1:18, 19; compare Exod 6:6; 15:13).

Being Part of God's Family

Peter unites this twin concept of holiness as *being already* set apart to God and as *still becoming* the kind of people He wants us to be, by using the deeply evocative concept of family. While believers may be in more than one sense aliens, or strangers to the families and societies to which they once belonged (1 Pet 1:1; 2:11; cf. 1:17), Peter portrays for them the reality that they live at this very moment within the embrace of a heavenly family. This family, he states, is one into which believers have already been reborn, is led by a merciful and protective divine Father, and is promised an incredible inheritance (1:2-5). It is as a part of this family, that Peter calls us to act "as obedient children" and to be holy as your Father, the Holy One who called you, is holy (1:14-16). To be like one's father would have been seen by those in Peter's world as practically a certainty, and even individualistic Western cultures still repeat the old saying, "like father, like son." And Peter goes further, stating a few verses later "for you *have been* born again not of seed which is perishable but imperishable, through the living and enduring word of God." If Peter wrote today, he might say believers have the Father's DNA, and so would of course be like him.

This understanding—that we have been born again of the seed of a divine Father—helps to put into perspective Peter's call to "Be holy." Such holiness is made possible for those whom God has delivered, and given divine rebirth. This primary role of God goes beyond the moment of birthing, for 2:5 states, "you yourselves are *being* built up as a spiritual house for a holy (*hagios*) priesthood," while 1:2 identifies the Holy Spirit as the one who enacts this sanctifying work (*hagiazō*; to make holy). Peter in 2:2 counsels believers then, as new-born babies, to "long for the pure milk of the word so that by it you may grow in respect to salvation." And as he leads into the call to holiness in the pericope of 1:13-21, the first instruction given is to prepare our minds, not by repetitive rehearsings of our failures and determinations to get it right this time, but by fixing "your hope completely on the grace that will be brought to you at the revelation of Jesus Christ" (1:13).

A Gift from God


Thus in 1 Peter, God's call to holiness is most certainly a call to action for believers. It is the call of a God who makes no place for sin, for sin is the cause of all the pain in His bright world. Yet the awesome thing is that in 1 Peter, as elsewhere in the NT, believers have already been welcomed into God's presence. This already completed setting apart to God (making holy), accomplished by God Himself is, according to Peter the basis, not the result, of our growth in holiness. The gift of our place in God's family is the root of our hope, the source of our power, the inspiration of our action. This gift is the single means which will one day heal the tension between holiness as being "set apart for a divine purpose," and as actuality being "completely pure and unblemished, able to stand in God's presence."

*All Scripture quotes are taken from the New American Standard Bible.

Posted by [Teresa Reeve](#) on February 27, 2011 in [Biblical Backgrounds](#), [Church and Society](#) | [Permalink](#)

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Aren't we now able to go boldly to the throne of grace? Was Moses completely pure and unblemished? Yet he was in the presence of God. Was Isaiah completely pure and unblemished? Yet he was in the presence of God ashamed of his unclean lips. Were the Apostles completely pure and unblemished? Yet they were filled with the very Spirit of the living God. Where do we get this teaching that we are to be completely pure and unblemished in order to be in intimate connection with God? Are we interjecting the tension of holiness by our misunderstanding of the Gospel?

Posted by: David de la Vega | [March 01, 2011 at 09:01 PM](#)

Thanks for your comments, David. I wholeheartedly agree with your reminder that believers can right now approach the throne of grace. 1 Peter communicates a similar idea in different language, when it is stated that we are already made holy and are right now a part of God's family through the redemption of Christ's blood. In fact in 1 Peter 3:5-6, the example he gives for holy women of old is Sarah, the one who abused the servant woman she insisted her husband marry, repeatedly lied to government officials, and laughed at God's word. This holiness Sarah and believers today already have, comes to us through the gracious forgiveness of God, blotting out our past sins and allowing us to enjoy the intimate closeness to Him of being part of His family.

At the same time, 1 Peter reminds us, we are participating members in a very messed up world, and neither we nor our Father want us to remain that way. Read 1 Peter carefully and you will find that he enthusiastically and repeatedly encourages God's children to grow in holiness. Now reborn into God's family (already in intimate connection with God), we want to be like Daddy! And He has provided the way.

In other words, neither 1 Peter nor I have "this teaching that we are to be completely pure and unblemished in order to be in intimate connection with God." Rather, "we are going to be pure and unblemished because we have continued in intimate connection with God."

Posted by: Teresa Reeve | [March 03, 2011 at 06:35 AM](#)

Thank you for your response Teresa. In reference to the holiness of Sarah, is holiness measured by the absence of sin (transgression of the law)? Is holiness and intimacy measured by law? Or is holiness the surrender of the human will that presumes to be like God, knowing good and evil; destroying ourselves on the altar of faith resulting in our rebirth as we are made alive by the Holy Spirit? Do we know we are holy by measuring ourselves against the law or by observing the work of the Spirit in us and through us?

Posted by: David de la Vega | [March 03, 2011 at 12:54 PM](#)

Important questions, but not ones 1 Peter specifically seeks to answer. My focus was to hear what 1 Peter had to say (which, by the way, obviously speaks of the holiness of Sarah as one set apart to God, not as perfectly sinless.) 1 Peter certainly focuses on holiness as a response to and result of what God has already done. You'll find the other part of the holiness tension brought out more in other Biblical books, including Leviticus, to which 1 Peter points. (Importantly, Leviticus points similarly to atonement as the resolution of this tension.)

Each biblical book gives a slightly different dimension on this and is worth looking at in its own right.

Posted by: Teresa Reeve | [March 07, 2011 at 07:55 AM](#)

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