

The First Sunday of Lent

*Pursuing Holiness, Part 1**Humble Endurance*

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I'm sure it's not surprising for anyone who's been around the church for more than 5 minutes that I often think 'in song.' When we first settled in on Pursuing Holiness for our Lenten study, the song that immediately popped into my mind was the song called Holiness. When I first learned this song, I learned it this way:

Holiness, holiness is what I long for.
 Holiness is what I need.
 Holiness, holiness is what you want from me.
 Take my heart, and form it.
 Take my mind, transform it.
 Take my will, conform it,
 to yours, to yours, O Lord.

But every time I sang it, the phrase 'holiness, holiness is what you want from me' 'stuck in my craw.' It didn't seem right. It didn't seem biblical. It didn't seem grace-based. So, I changed the word 'from' to 'for.' 'Holiness, holiness is what you want for me.' Because, if God wants holiness from me, that's not going to go well. But, relying on the mercy, the grace, & the ever-flowing provision from God to me as his child, I can begin to live out the holy, righteous standing I have before God because of Jesus' death and resurrection.

Allow me to go back and review some really important biblical truths.

- There are two kinds of people in the world. Saved and unsaved. People who are created by God (that's everyone) and people who have been adopted into God's family and are now children of God (that's not everyone). Contrary to the messages we are bombarded with every day that there are republicans and democrats and conservatives and progressives and blacks and whites and rich and poor and married and single and employed and unemployed and in school and out of school, etc., ultimately there are only TWO KINDS of people in God's eyes. Saved and unsaved. Not saved from the schemes of the devil who wants us to live in chains here and in the fires of hell later or saved for a life of peace and freedom from being slaves to sin and shame here on earth, and saved for the joy of eternal life in heaven later.
- A person becomes saved by putting their faith in Jesus Christ. Romans 10:9 declares, *"If you confess with your lips that Jesus is LORD (he is over all, in all, and through all), and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved."* These are not just words, this is a transformation that occurs. This is a transaction that occurs that takes a person from the kingdom of darkness into the kingdom of Light. This is an out-loud confession of the Lordship of Jesus Christ over your life and over the whole world, and this is a deep, supernatural change in your heart that you just know that you know that you know that Jesus died on the cross to pay the price for your sins and on the third day he rose from the dead! If you confess out loud with your lips and believe in your heart that God raised Jesus from the dead, you are a saved child of God forever and ever.
- When you step over the line from unsaved to saved, the righteousness of Christ covers you. The holiness of Jesus Christ, his perfect, no-sin life, is put on you like a cloak, like a new skin that can't be shed, so that one day when it's your turn to go to heaven, when God the Father looks on you he doesn't see your sinful self, he sees his son, Jesus Christ and welcomes you home with a party to beat all parties!
- BIG POINT: We already have a holy, right standing before God.
- BIG QUESTION: So why "Pursue Holiness" if we already have it through Christ?

Have you ever heard that phrase, “Be the person your dog thinks you are?” It’s sort of like that. In gratitude for all that God has already done for us in Christ, we want the practical, day-to-day working out of our lives, of our faith to match our new skin. Because when it doesn’t, there’s a tension inside. There’s one of these: 😞. We feel unsettled. Because we have a love for God, we want to honor him. We want to please him. We want our lives to count for him. We want to be the person God knows we are in Christ. That’s called pursuing holiness.

We are digging into the book of James as our instruction manual during Lent. James is writing to Jewish Christians who were being persecuted, even killed for their faith in Jesus. And so he addresses their biggest concern right off the tee. *“2 Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds, 3 because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance. 4 Let perseverance finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything. 5 If any of you lacks wisdom, you should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to you. 6 But when you ask, you must believe and not doubt, because the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea, blown and tossed by the wind. 7 That person should not expect to receive anything from the Lord. 8 Such a person is double-minded and unstable in all they do.”*

James is saying to his brothers and sisters, “When you’re going through a hard time, a potentially crushing, confusing time, instead of crying out, “God, why me? Why is this happening to me? Why aren’t you fixing this? Why didn’t you shield me from this?” how about instead we fall to our knees and ask for wisdom in the midst of the trial. Because the world is so broken. The trial is here. The diagnosis is in. The divorce papers have been filed. The grade came back an F. The foreclosure notice is inevitable. The evidence of drug-use has been discovered. The door has been slammed. The trial is here. It does no good to question God, to rail against God, or to blame circumstances or others for the onset of the trial. The trial is here. James is telling us how to endure, how to make it through the trial with patience and come out the other side stronger and more mature in our faith, not lacking anything.

How do we endure? Ask God. Ask God for wisdom to know how to endure the trial, and he will give it. Did you catch the three facets of how God, who is ever-giving, gives wisdom to those who ask? First, he gives generously. Second, he gives to all. Third, he gives without finding fault. Wow. God doesn’t come to the person asking for wisdom and say, “Well, maybe I’ll give you a little wisdom the next time you ask but not this time because of how you’ve been treating your parents, because of the lie you told yesterday, because of how you’ve been living.” No. God gives wisdom generously to all without finding fault.

Listen, wisdom is not knowledge. Humanity, over the centuries has amassed a huge store of knowledge about the world, but shows an appalling lack of wisdom by failing to live any better in the world with each passing decade. Wisdom is understanding for living. Biblical wisdom is understanding for living which surpasses earthly wisdom, and in fact is often upside-down from what the world says is right to do. But there is one condition for receiving God’s wisdom. We have to ask for wisdom and not doubt that God will give it. We have to ask for wisdom and not doubt that God will give it. *“6 But when you ask, you must believe and not doubt, because the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea, blown and tossed by the wind. 7 That person should not expect to receive anything from the Lord. 8 Such a person is double-minded and unstable in all they do.”*

The picture is of a person bobbing around like a cork on a raging sea, torn within by two voices (which very well might describe some in the church). It’s not that the person isn’t a believer. It’s not that the person isn’t saved. But the doubting, unstable, vacillating, up and down, maybe, maybe not life of faith means there’s not going to be any wisdom given from God to help you handle your troubles. Now, you may be thinking, ‘but I have doubts sometimes.’ Of course you do. We all do. But James is not talking about a person naturally wrestling with doubt, but a person who has two minds, a person who says they look to God, but just keeps doing their own thing. This person has no

endurance. They have no patience. They send a text message to God and expect him to answer within 30 seconds. No patience. No endurance. And then they say things like, "I asked God, but he never answers me." How long did you wait? How well did you listen? What were you doing while you were waiting? Were you living into the new holy skin of righteousness already on you?

James knows what he's talking about. James isn't just spouting words that he hasn't lived. He knows what trials and testing can do in the life of God's children. He knows the benefit of endurance. He knows the gift of maturing as a disciple, finding wholeness and peace. He knows. And this is why he tells us to consider it pure joy when these trials come our way – because if we ask him – God will use the trial to develop something in us that we do not already possess that he knows we need for the next trial.

After thinking about the Holiness song when we first settled on Pursuing Holiness for our Lenten study, the next thing that popped into my mind was a picture of Joyce Treible. I can still be in the hospital room with her the day that she was in there with yet another infection of some sort and hear her say to me, "Meagan, I am so blessed." Paralyzed from the waist down, a cancer survivor, unable to do so much that we dream of doing in our retirement years, and out of the fullness of a heart claimed by Christ, oozing out of the new skin Christ had fit to her perfectly years before – was joy. Her eyes lit up and tears fell out. "I am so blessed," she said as she counted her blessings out loud to me. It didn't mean her circumstances had changed and she was 'all better.' It meant that she had moved another step towards spiritual maturity, towards completeness, not lacking anything.

Is this something you want? Is this a desire God has placed within you - to be able to consider it pure joy to be in the midst of the trials of life (which seems to come as regularly as the waves of the ocean), so that you can become a mature, complete believer not lacking anything? Then ask God for wisdom to know how to endure the trial, how to be patient in the trial, and how to see the blessings in the trial. And then, wait, listen, and watch expectantly to see how God will begin to mature your faith and in so doing, use your time of trial not just for you and your growth, but use it to introduce others around you to the life-giving, ever-flowing grace of God through Jesus Christ the Lord.

Let us pray: *Father God, thank you for this teaching. Thank you for the new skin of righteousness that you give us when we come in faith to you. Thank you for calling us to holiness, thank you for your grace that changes everything. As we come to the Table, set by your mercy and grace and love, we want to come ready. We want to come with hearts and minds fully set on what you have done for us. Hear us now, as we come, confessing the ways that we have sinned against you and against others. (Silence). Amen.*

Hear these words of assurance of our forgiveness from the song It is Well. "My sin, Oh the bliss of this glorious thought! My sin, not in part, but the whole is nailed to the cross and I bear it no more. Praise the Lord, Praise the Lord, O my soul."

Amen.