

**Pursing the Holy**

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Wednesday

We aren't using it tonight, but I'd like to read you a short quote from the Ash Wednesday liturgy in our Prayer Book.

“It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God: he shall pour down rain upon the sinners—snares, fire and brimstone, storm and tempest; this shall be their portion to drink. For lo, the Lord is come out of his place to visit the wickedness of such as dwell upon the earth.”

God's wrath is a difficult thing to hear about. God's justice is an even more difficult thing for us to hear about. If all we read about is God's wrath, we can always sit back smugly and think to ourselves that we're “good” people safe from God's wrath. We can look back at all those Old Testament commandments and think: I haven't cursed my parents; I haven't moved my neighbour's landmark; I haven't made a blind man go out of his way; I haven't committed adultery with my neighbour. We think we're generally pretty good; we're certainly not “unmerciful, fornicators, and adulterers, covetous persons, idolaters, slanderer, drunkards, and extortioners!” We're “good” people after all! We'll all just sit back and watch the fire and brimstone fall on Sodom while we enjoy the show, secure in our own righteousness...

But it has to be asked: What's our measuring stick? I was reading Jerry Bridges' *The Pursuit of Holiness* this past week as I was preparing Sunday night's sermon, and he had some very insightful thoughts. One thing he said really struck me:

“One day as I was reading the second chapter of 1 John, I realized that my personal life's objective regarding holiness was less than that of John's. He was saying, in effect, ‘Make it your aim *not* to sin.’ As I thought about this, I realized that deep within my heart my real aim was not to sin ‘very much’ – Can you imagine a soldier going into battle with the aim of ‘not getting hit very much?’”

I think that's exactly what most of us do as Christians. The simple fact is that in this life we'll never reach a state of perfect holiness – every time we seem to have cleaned the sin that God has shown us out of one corner of our life, he turns us around and points to another corner saying “You missed a spot.” I'm convinced that this never stops. When we first become Christians God reveals the sin in our lives to us and gives us grace to deal with it – with the big and obvious stuff – but the more mature we become the closer in he focuses our attention. It's like God puts our eye up to his sin-viewing microscope and just keeps increasing the power to show us “smaller and smaller” sins in our lives.

But even as we clean things up in one area of life, we're always guilty of knowingly engaging in sin in other areas. I think we have some incentive to deal with those that we know other people will

notice, but it's not always easy to put away our secret sins that nobody knows about and that don't seem to hurt anyone else. And so we go through our lives proud of the fact that on one hand we're not murders or adulterers or thieves. “God's wrath won't fall on us – we're good people.” It's like we think that God's going to grade us on a curve when the test comes. “Sure we're not perfect,” we say, “but we're pretty good – at least better than most.”

The problem is that God's wrath doesn't stand on its own. God's wrath is the result of God's holiness and his justice. We can shrug off his wrath as long as we're not thinking any further than that. But when we really understand God's holiness and his justice...we ought to be shaking in our shoes. When we understand the holiness of God we understand that “the axe put unto the root...of the tree that bringeth not forth good fruit” is coming for each and every one of us.

To be holy means to be set apart and to be utterly, totally, and perfectly pure. If something is perfectly holy it cannot be defiled by sin. And that's why God cannot tolerate sin. He can't grade on a curve. He can't somehow adjust his standards in order to accommodate our little peccadilloes. If he did he would be less than God. And so God's perfect holiness demands perfect justice – it means the destruction of every person with the slightest stain of sin.

Our hope is Christ:

Holy Scripture tells us: “Although we have sinned, yet have we an Advocate with the Father, Jesus

Christ the righteous; and he is the propitiation for our sins. For he was wounded for our offences, and smitten for our wickedness.”

Jesus is the “curve breaker,” the one perfect person who succeeded in living a perfectly holy life, totally free from the stain of sin. He willingly took our sin on himself and was punished – received the divine death penalty – in our place. It’s only through him that we can escape God’s wrath and find a way to approach his holiness.

In Christ we have a model to follow in our own pursuit of holiness and through him we receive the grace that enables us to purge the sin from our lives. But do we really do that? Do we take advantage of God’s grace to purify ourselves, or is God’s grace just fire insurance? St. John doesn’t tell us to just avoid the “big” sins – he’s saying, “Don’t sin at all!” St. John writes,

And by this we may be sure that we know him, if we keep his commandments. He who says “I know him” but disobeys his commandments is a liar, and the truth is not in him; but whoever keeps his word, in him truly love for God is perfected. By this we may be sure that we are in him: he who says he abides in him ought to walk in the same way in which he walked. (1 St. John 2:3-6)

We should have this in mind all the time. The Christian life is about living in God’s grace, forgiven through Christ, and living filled with the Holy Spirit so that we can follow in the footsteps of Christ as he walks before us. The pursuit of

holiness should be something we’re actively doing – 24/7, 365 days a year, each day allowing God to turn up the power on his sin viewing microscope just a little bit more to show us sin in our lives so that we can conquer it with his help.

But Lent is the time set aside in the Church year to deliberately put our focus on just this. Lent should renew our zeal for the holy. It scares me that in too many so-called “Christian” traditions, the day before Lent is the day to party it up, to get all the sinning out of the way before we approach the holy in Lent. That’s scary! It tells me that the people who live that way have no concept of the holiness of God, because if they did, they’d be cowering in fear on Ash Wednesday remembering what they did the day before. But they have no concept of the holy – they put in forty days worth of partying the day before Lent starts, then give it up for a few weeks as if that’s going to bring them closer to God.

Lent isn’t about superficial sacrifices. It’s not about going without chocolate or meat as a way to prove to ourselves, or to the people around us, or even to God that we can show a measure of self-control for forty days. Lent’s about taking time to renew our focus on Christ and on a life of personal holiness. It’s not a “downer” season of the Church year. If we’re trying to root out the sin in our lives, it should be discouraging to us as we begin to see all the sin that remains, but at the same time it should be a joyful occasion – a time to take great joy in the grace and mercy of God and to grab hold of Christ – to say, “Master, help me

to follow you better.”

By all means, make a sacrifice in your life during these forty days, but understand what it’s for. Make a sacrifice that will help you to fully pursue the holy. The point of the tradition of abstinence from Saturday evening to Sunday morning is to prepare our hearts for Communion with Jesus as we celebrate the Lord’s Supper. Having time to devote to reflection on our personal pursuit of holiness gives us a chance to prepare to come into God’s presence as we first approach his throne of mercy to ask forgiveness for our sins and then we glory in his grace and come into his presence joyfully and with hearts ready for praise and worship. So in these forty days before Easter, give your hearts up to contemplation of what it means to be holy. Let the Spirit reveal the dark corners and confess to God the things you find there, then grab hold of his grace and follow in Christ’s holy footsteps.

As we prayed in the Collect of the Day, God hates nothing that he has made, and forgives the sins of all those who are penitent. Come before him and let him make in you a new creation – let our merciful God restore you and renew you through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.