

The Christian's Calling

1 Peter 1:13-21

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So let's turn in God's Word this morning to the Book of 1 Peter as we continue our walk through this first letter from the apostle Peter to the churches scattered throughout what is now modern-day Turkey, as they were experiencing localized persecution, pressure, because of their commitment and love for the Lord Jesus Christ and their becoming Christians and following the way of Christ. And he was seeking to encourage them. He was seeking to challenge them. But he was grounding it in the work of Christ. But as he grounds it in the work of Christ, we looked at last week the nature of the grace of Christ. It is outrageous in that it is completely and utterly free, meaning we cannot do anything to earn that grace. It requires actually that God is the one who gave of himself completely, so that that grace would be poured out. And in that pouring out of that grace through the work of Jesus Christ, in his death and in his resurrection, God means to make himself a people that he draws to himself by his grace, his loving care, his gracious forgiveness, his mighty mercy.

That isn't to say, however, that though there is nothing that we can do to earn that grace, and that that grace is free—and it most certainly is—it doesn't mean, however, that there isn't a call associated with that grace. That when God calls us by his work and through the work of Jesus Christ into relationship, we are called into relationship. It is the call of the Christian. And in these verses this morning, verse thirteen to twenty-one, we'll look at the call of the Christian. And I want to set it up in this way.

In this room, we have a whole spectrum of types of relationships. Broadly speaking, there are those here this morning who are married, and there are those here who are not married. Nonetheless, whether you are married or not married, in some way, shape, or form, you are in relationship with other people. And when you are in relationship with other people, your status changes. By that, it means you're no longer alone; you're in relationship with other people. Now, there can be various depths to those relationships, but nonetheless, when you're in relationship with other people, your status changes. And when your status changes, there are activities that are particularly associated to those kinds of friendships. There are commitments. There are obligations that we give ourselves to, to maintain those relationships. If you will, there is a particular call in that relationship—that if you simply sit back and just passively allow that relationship to develop, it's not going to go very far. Because to be in relationship with others has implications, and those implications are both messy, they're difficult, but they are also incredibly glorious. And they have the potential—indeed, it will change us. If you do not want to be changed, then don't be in relationship with other people.

So therefore, God's grace is absolutely free. But to be in relationship with a gracious God who has purchased us by the blood of Christ and been victorious over sin and the resurrection from the dead, then he has called us into relationship. And that relationship will mean changes. What are those changes? What do they look like? That is the call of the Christian. So let's look together. 1 Peter 1:13-21.

Therefore, 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. As obedient children, do not conform to the evil desires you had when you lived in ignorance. 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."

Since you call on a Father who judges each person's work impartially, live out your time as foreigners here in reverent fear. For 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, but with the precious blood of Christ, a lamb without blemish or defect. He was chosen before the creation of the world, but was revealed in these last times for your sake. Through him you believe in God, who raised him from the dead and glorified him, and so your faith and hope are in God.

This is the Word of God. Thanks be to God. Let's pray together.

Father, I want to thank you for this wonderful word to us. And may it be to us a feast of our favorite food. May it satisfy us. May it encourage us. May it strengthen us. But may it call us to a deeper life in relationship with you. I'm reminded this morning as I pray over this, Your Word, I am reminded of the words of Augustine. And those words were that you are a God who calls. You are a God who calls us to obedience. But you also give us the grace to obey. Command what you will, but will what you command. In Jesus' name, whose name is above every name. To him be the glory. Amen.

You see in your outline this morning the three points. And at the end, we will specifically be asking this question—and you can write it in your notes if you like. It is: what is our obstacle to this calling? What is our obstacle? And so you will see the three points, the three parts of the call, here, to be a Christian. It is the call to hope, the call to holiness, and the call to fear. Then, what is our obstacle, then, to this calling? And so as a way of accountability, I'm going to tell you that the outline takes up a disproportionate amount of the page, giving you the impression that I'm going to spend most of my time in these three points. Not so. I'm going to walk through each of these three points at a particular pace, because I believe they really come into bold relief, to visibility for us, when we think about what is our obstacle to this calling.

So first, the calling to hope. He says in verse thirteen specifically when he says, "Therefore, prepare your minds for action, and set your hope fully on the grace"—and this is key; pay attention to verb tenses—"that is to be given you when Jesus Christ is revealed." The calling for hope, first and foremost, as a sub-point, is to hope with the end in mind. It is a hope not based on our present circumstances. It is a hope based on what will be. This is theological language when I say Peter is speaking in eschatological terms with a *telos*, with an end, in mind. It is not a gleeful, trite response to difficulty. If you're in the midst of suffering and persecution, well, just be hopeful. Skip through life. It is not a denial of suffering. It is not in any way a diminishing of a life of difficulty or persecution. Rather, it is saying in the midst of these things, do not be defined by what your circumstances are, but rather be defined in your hope by what will be.

And he says—what is he saying? The end that is to be in mind is most particularly that Christ, who is victorious over sin and death, will come again. And when he comes again, that grace, God's unmerited favor, his glory, his strength, his power, will be revealed. Christ who is now victorious will reveal that victory in an awesome revelation of his return. Therefore, to hope and to be called to hope as a Christian is to do so with the end in mind. This is not the way it will finish, but Christ in his glorious presence will be the end. A new heaven and a new earth.

And so he says, "Prepare your mind." Think beyond your circumstances, what you can see, even what you can perceive. But imagine if Christ was raised from the dead and it was miraculous, how much more glorious and beautiful will it be for Christ, robed in inapproachable light, to reveal himself to the world? And every knee shall bow and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord. And I'm about to get all Pentecostal up here. It makes me excited. As I began reflecting on this and knowing that I was going to be preaching this verse to you, as I was singing this morning—I get to tell you that the end of life is not cancer. The end of life is not death. The end of life is not brokenness. The end of life is *life*. Hope with the end in mind. Set your mind to it. Read about the glorious return of Christ.

Secondly, who is in the end? I've already said it, and I'm not going to expound it any more. It is Christ, the Lion of Judah, the King of kings, the Lord of lords, the Lamb that was slain who will come in all

of his glory. And we will know it is the great Shepherd of the sheep, because on his hands we will see the scars that have purchased salvation for his people. It is a call to hope with the end in mind of the glorious appearance of Christ. And you bring that into the now. It isn't that we suffer less. It isn't that we're any less broken. It isn't that we're any less sorrowful. But all of it is tinged with a joyful hope that this is not the end. Life is.

Let me give you this illustration. Do you know what it means to fix your mind, then, on this call to hope? Imagine the absurdity of being an art major who then goes on to a Ph.D. in art, and your dissertation is on the work and the paintings of Peter Paul Reubens, and particularly his painting of Daniel in the lion's den. You've studied it. You've written about it. But you never had the opportunity to actually see it in person. So you buy a plane ticket, because you know you're going to have to defend your dissertation. How can you do a dissertation without trying to see it? You get your plane ticket. You saved up for it. You get a rental car. You get out at Dulles Airport or BWI or Reagan National, you get a rental car, and you drive to the National Gallery of Art—which, by the way, that's where it is. If you're a Christian and you have a car, go there. But you're a Ph.D. student, so work with me. We're in the car together. You're in your car. You go to the National Gallery of Art. You get your parking space. And you sit there. And you think about how you've longed and you've hoped. And you really want to see that painting. But you just stay in your car all day, in the parking deck, and you never go in to actually see it.

It's one thing to have a hope, but it's not much of a hope if how you respond to it is passively. You have to get out of the car. You have to set your mind to actually walking up the steps of the museum, finding somebody who can tell you where it is. And then when you walk up those stairs and you walk into that room where that painting is—and I remember the first time I saw it. My wife, who's here today, had her hands over my eyes, because she didn't want me to see it any other way. She had her hands over my eyes, and then she goes, "Now, open your eyes." She sat me down on the bench that's right in front of the painting. It's massive. And I was just—*wow*. But it required work to get there.

Hope is what we are called to, but it's not a hope that we just passively wait on. It's a hope that we have to set our minds to. Are you setting your mind to the hope? Are you searching the Word for what is to come? Are you meditating on the glory of Christ? Are you resting in what will be the final chapter? That's the work. Get out of the car and go and see, not the painting of a dead artist, but meditate on the living King.

Secondly, the call to holiness, when he says this—and this sometimes strikes us odd, right? He says, "As obedient children, do not conform to the evil desires you had when you lived in ignorance. 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.'" He's quoting specifically from the Book of Leviticus. And when we hear the word "holiness," and the reason why it strikes us as odd is because we immediately think about all the holy stuff we need to do. And that somehow what I'm going to do is I'm going to start giving you a list of the things you need to obey and the things you need to do and the things you need to avoid doing. But that's not first and foremost what Peter is getting at. Yes, he does talk about obedience, and we'll get there in a moment. But notice what he grounds it in.

After he says in verse fourteen, "Do not conform any longer to the evil desires you had when you lived in ignorance," he then grounds it by saying—in other words, this is where we have to start. "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.'" What he's saying is that the whole idea of calling to holiness is to recognize that to follow Christ, to place your hope in him, means that you have been declared holy because he is. It's getting back to what we looked at last week. It is his holiness that precedes our salvation. It is his holiness that precedes our reception of grace. And that when we receive that grace, when we answer the call to hope in Christ, we are declared righteous. We are declared holy. We are wholly his. And so that means being called to holiness means to live out what it is to be in union with the Father through Christ the Son, empowered by the Holy Spirit.

And so first and foremost, it's not a list of do's and don't's. It is about a relationship. For he who is holy has made you holy. [Phone rings.] And you need to answer the call. That was perfect! That was so good, right? That was totally a sermon illustration right there. So it's okay. So you are called to holiness. Someone's calling you. Why do you answer? Because you're already in relationship. Let's go with this. This totally works! But you get what I'm saying? The reason why they even have your number is because—well, maybe it's a dumb caller who's got the wrong number, but that's a different point. But the point is, you're in union in some way with that person. Right? You know, when my wife texts me, I so answer that text. Why? Not because there's a list of do's and don't's, and she'll get me if I don't—eventually she might—but the issue is, I'm in union with her. Right? I'm in union with her. And so it's not because, you know, she gave me a list of do's and don't's for the day, or that God gives you a list of do's and don't's. The first thing he says—"For I am your God, and you are my people."

And so when we have our hope in Christ, it is God who came after us and made us his own. And the implications of that first and foremost is relationship. And if we're in relationship with one who is holy, therefore, he says, obey. That means there are commitments. Do you remember what I said earlier? To be in relationship with the holiness of the Father—his purity, his glory, his beauty—is to have a new status. And to be in that new status means that there are new commitments. We are new people. And as new people, there are new ways of life. And those commitments issue forth from that.

And in many ways, Peter is picking up on what Paul used to talk about as the new man and the old man, or the new self and the old self. You have been made new in Christ, and you no longer feed the old man and your old way of practices in disobedience. Rather, you live as one who's been made new, and you pursue the means of grace—the Word, the sacraments, and prayer—as it changes us mentally, spiritually, yes, and even physically. To be called to holiness means first to be called into union with a glorious Father, and issues forth from that new ways of living.

But there is also the call to fear when he says, "Since you call on a Father who judges each person's work impartially, live out your time as foreigners here in reverent fear." For a lot of people, that whole idea of fear is such a stumbling block. Oh, here we go again, Christians talking about how we need to fear God. But I will tell you, the problem isn't that we talk about the fear of God. It's that we talk about the fear of God in the wrong way. It isn't a cowering because God is out to get us. He talks about it in terms of reverent fear. And I think about it in this way. I believe what he's getting at is to hear the call to fear is to recognize the call to the one who actually has dominion in the world, the one who has dominion over your life, the one who has authority over us. The call to fear is a calling to recognizing that it is God who has dominion over all of my life, every compartment, every facet, every drawer, every nook and cranny. He is the one who has the authority over my entire being, my way of life, because he is the one who gives life. He is the one who has created me and created you in his image.

So to live in reverent fear is to first recognize that he's the one who has dominion. But there's another aspect to fear, and it's this, when he says—he grounds this call in this way:

For 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, but with the precious blood of Christ, a lamb without blemish or defect. He was chosen before the creation of the world, but was revealed in these last times for your sake. Through him you believe in God, who raised him from the dead and glorified him, and so your faith and hope are in God.

The beautiful thing about this is we don't just have fear because he is the one who has dominion and authority—and that is true. But we are to fear him because of who he is in terms of his character. Do you see? The call to fear is grounded in the character of who God is. Can you put up that last slide for me that I was talking about earlier? This is what we heard played for us instrumentally:

Dark is the stain that we cannot hide.
What can avail to wash it away?
Look! There is flowing a crimson tide,
Whiter than snow you may be today.

Grace, grace, God's grace,
Grace that will pardon and cleanse within;
Grace, grace, God's grace,
Grace that is greater than all our sin.

Why is God worthy of our fear? Because his first inclination is not wrath, it is not justice, it is grace. It isn't that God is not a God who has wrath. It is not that God does not have justice. But if God's first inclination was justice and wrath, who of us could stand? But because his first inclination is redemption, from the very beginning, God set out on the process of redeeming his people. And when there did come for a time of justice and wrath, on whom has God poured out his justice and wrath? He poured it out on himself in his Son, Jesus Christ. And as such, he is worthy to be feared. We are called to fear him, because the one who has dominion, the one who has authority, is the one who has revealed it through the weakness of his Son on the cross. And through that weakness and the pouring out of his wrath and justice on his Son that was due to us, God reveals just how worthy of our reverent fear he is. Because he is a God of grace.

So there you have it. We are called to hope. We are called to holiness. We are called to fear. Because we have been brought into a relationship with our Heavenly Father. And as such, that relationship has a calling attached to it. And this is the calling of the Christian. But what is our greatest obstacle to this? And I want to go back with you to a really old word, a word you know as the word called "sloth." Now, we hear of the word "sloth" and we think *laziness*. Generally, in our minds, when we think of the word "sloth," we think of just sitting around on the couch, not doing anything, just trying to avoid all physical labor together. The problem is, that is the most recent definition of sloth, but not is original definition of the word "sloth."

The only reason why the word "sloth" has been reduced to laziness is because we've largely stopped talking about God in the broader culture, and that has effect on the way we understand and learn what words mean. But the original word "sloth" comes from the Greek word *acedia*. And, yes, one of its consequences is laziness, but its first goal is not to think of physical laziness. It is first and foremost meant to be in opposition to the pursuit of grace. So you have grace on the one hand, and you have *acedia* on the other, sloth. Meaning they are opposites of one another.

The pursuit of grace is what the Christian is called to, but one of our greatest obstacles is slothfulness, meaning not physical laziness but rather a resistance to hear the call to the commitments that are entailed in being in relationship with our Heavenly Father. Let's use a metaphor. Can I go back to marriage if you don't mind? Oh, I know you're just waiting for that, so let's do that together. So imagine if you will—and I'm going to use one writer, because it's pretty good. So here we go. Let's use an example, a typical situation, an everyday life situation between a husband and wife:

In general, theirs is a relationship of great and enduring friendship (most of the time). But when they argue at dinnertime and head off to opposite corners of the house for the rest of the evening, it is much easier to maintain that miserable distance and alienation from each other than it is to do the work of apology, forgiveness, and reconciliation. Learning to live together and love each other well after a rift requires giving up their anger, their score-keeping, their resistance to change, their desire to have their own way, their insistence on seeing the world only from each of their own perspectives. Saying "I'm sorry" takes effort, but it is not simply the physical work of walking across the house and saying the words that each resists.

Do they want the relationship? Yes, they're in it and they're in deep. But do they want to do what it takes to be in relationship; do they want to honor its claims on them? Do they want to learn genuine unselfishness in the ordinary daily task of living together? Maybe tomorrow. For now at least, each spouse wants the night off to wallow in his or her own selfish loneliness. Love takes effort. Those with *acedia* want the easy life, for they find detachment from the old selfish nature too painful and burdensome, and so they neglect acts of love that will maintain and deepen the relationship.

["Acedia's Resistance to the Demands of Love: Aquinas on the Vice of Sloth"
by Rebecca Konyndyk DeYoung, Calvin College]

This is a metaphor for our relationship with God. In other words, we want—if we're honest, at our very hearts, we like the idea of being in relationship with a gracious, holy, loving Father. It's a great idea, until we recognize the commitments and inherent obligations of the relationship. And in that relationship, while we come into his grace and mercy, it changes us. And when it changes us, it forces us—or at least it certainly requires of us to change our priorities, to focus our thinking, to have our desires and our natural inclinations challenged. And that, quite frankly, is uncomfortable—is it not?

And it's very easy to want to coast with God, to stay at the shallow end of the pool. Or, if you will, to choose the social networking aspect of the spiritual life, treating our relationship of God much like we would most of our friends on Facebook. We want to put out our status to our friends, and they can comment on it. We really like it if they "like" it. And we really enjoy the replies, so long as they're in agreement with how we're doing. But if the reply comes into contradiction with how we're feeling or how we're do, well then we'll just unfriend you.

And so when it comes to our relationship with God, we would love to send up to him our basic status every day. This is how I'm doing. Do you like it? Can you give me a few words? We're good, right? In other words, we love the comfortable distance, so long as it works for us. But when the call to relationship, the call to hope in the midst of suffering and brokenness, when the call to holiness comes and it contradicts our natural desires, our inclination is to want to be left alone. When the call, indeed, to fearing the God who actually has dominion over us and not ourselves, then we recognize that this call to being a Christian is far more difficult than we ever imagined.

And therein lies our greatest obstacle. It is very easy to want to live at a distance with God. And his ways seem burdensome. Oh, I have to pray. I have to read the Word. Are you given to that? I am. As I was preparing for this Sunday, I began studying—well, totally the Holy Spirit. And if you don't know what that means, I'll tell you about it later. But here's what I mean. I was in a conversation with someone about this subject, not at all finding any connection with where God was going to lead in terms of his Word. But I went back to my office, and I began studying this old word "sloth," *acedia*. And as I did, I went deeper and deeper. And when I got to the end of my day on Wednesday, it was like God shining a light on my life and on the areas in my life in which I have been comfortable with a nice, comfortable distance with God. And I began to see how slothful (oh, I'm busy), how distant (oh, I'm in relationship), how lazy (oh, my calendar's full), I've been with regard to my own relationship with the Father. And he began to shine an LED spotlight on different areas. It was painful. It is painful. It's painful for me to talk about it.

But do you know what I was reminded of? And I'll finish with this, because I have to. Matthew 11. Do you remember? There's a passage in Matthew 11 where Jesus says to those of you who are struggling with slothfulness, wanting to keep God at a comfortable distance, growing tired, perhaps, of the burdens of this relationship with Jesus—from Jesus's own lips, I was reminded of this verse: "Come unto me, all who are weary and heavy laden, and I will give you rest. For my yolk is easy, and my burden is light."

And when I remembered that call, that light of God by his grace and his Word, the areas where I have been slothful became not a burden but became a delight, because I saw the one that was shining the

light is the one who is full of grace and truth. The one whose yolk is easy, and whose burden is light. The one whose great will pardon and cleanse within, whose grace is greater than all our sin. It was in that moment that the Holy Spirit gave me a beautiful painting of the glorious nature of Christ, and of our loving Father, who's called us into relationship with him. And that burden is anything but difficult. It is glorious. It requires change, but he is good, and he loves us, and he means to change us into his image. This is the call. Perhaps I've done a poor job of communicating it. But know this: the one who has called you is good. Let's pray.

Heavenly Father, now we ask, as we've heard this call to being a Christian, the call to hope and holiness and fear—on the one hand, Lord, they seem difficult. And they are. But their difficulty is overshadowed and infused with the glorious nature of our gracious Father, and the glorious nature of our gracious Savior, Jesus Christ, and the glorious nature and the power of the Spirit. Lord, you call us to this relationship and the commitments therein. Lord, our Father, command what you will, but then will what you command. By your grace, enable us to hear and follow this calling. In Jesus' name. Amen.