

Isaiah 40:6-8

1 Peter 1:13-25

April 23, 2023

Preached by Philip Gladden at the Wallace Presbyterian Church, Wallace, NC

A CALL TO HOLY LIVING

Let us pray: Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

In 1967's Season Two of the Batman TV series, The Puzzler kidnaps Batman and Robin and traps them in a hot air balloon. The basket is rigged to drop to the ground when they reach 20,000 feet. "Holy Graf Zeppelin, Batman! What do we do now?" asks Robin. This is only one of the 378 "Holys" that Robin uttered in desperate times in 120 episodes during three seasons – just a tad more than three times per episode! Throughout their weekly escapades, Robin expressed some strange thoughts – Holy IT&T! Holy tintinnabulation! Holy Uncanny Photographic Mental Processes! Holy Knit One, Purl Two! Holy Luther Burbank!" One TV critic thinks Robin's very last "Holy" at the end of Season Three might have been the reason the show didn't return for a fourth season. He asks, "How could you top this?" Minerva, played by Zsa Zsa Gabor, entices rich victims to her spa where she uses a special piece of equipment to tell her their secrets, usually about their money. Here's a bit of the dialogue:

Batman: Yes, I'm looking forward to Minerva's famous eggplant-jelly vitamin scalp massage.

Goon: Minerva thought you might pop into the Persimmon Pressurizer first.

Robin: Persimmon Pressurizer? Holy astringent plum-like fruit!

Batman: Only astringent until ripe, Robin.

The Batman series was the epitome of cheesy, campy, corny, over-the-top writing and acting, but maybe that's what makes Batman on TV so memorable!

Robin's "Holys!" helped make the phrase part of the American vernacular. But even before Batman and Robin on TV, one of my dad's stock catchphrases was "Holy smoke!" As a kid, I never really understood what that phrase meant, but his body language and emotion conveyed that

he was surprised or shocked about something. It doesn't seem as if you hear many people say "Holy smoke!" or "Holy mackerel!" or "Holy Toledo!" any more. "Holy Houdini Batman! Holy smokes! Holy Toledo!" probably won't help us understand our call to holy living as followers of Jesus Christ and people of God.

Then there's "holier-than-thou," an adjective that is defined as "characterized by an attitude of moral superiority; marked by an air of superior piety," as in "People who are holier-than-thou think that they are morally better than anyone else." Here are some synonyms for "holier-than-thou" — judgmental, moralistic, pearl-clutching, preachy, sanctimonious, self-righteous, goody-goody, smug, snobbish. Here's what the Lord God had to say through the prophet Isaiah to his people when they started thinking of themselves that way: "I was ready to be sought out by those who did not ask, to be found by those who did not seek me. I said, 'Here I am, here I am,' to a nation that did not call on my name. I held out my hands all day long to a rebellious people, who walk in a way that is not good, following their own devices; a people who provoke me to my face continually, sacrificing in gardens and offering incense on bricks; who sit inside tombs, and spend the night in secret places; who eat swine's flesh, with broth of abominable things in their vessels; who say, 'Keep to yourself, do not come near me, for I am too holy for you.' These are a smoke in my nostrils, a fire that burns all day long." (Isaiah 65:5)

That's quite different from this description of "holy living" that we find in Colossians 3: "As God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. Bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other; just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in the one body. And be thankful." (Colossians 3:12-15)

Do you remember seeing the bumper sticker that said, "Christians aren't perfect, just forgiven"? In a blog titled "Christians Aren't Perfect Just Forgiving," R.C. Sproul, Jr. writes, "The common bumper sticker makes a salient point. The watching world affirms that what makes Christians so

reprehensible is our hypocrisy. They see us sin, while believing we believe that we don't sin. And they hate us for it. The sticker, then, answers the objection: 'Christians aren't perfect, just forgiven.' We're not perfect. We are forgiven. But the forgiveness we have from the Father works itself out, takes on feet, when we in turn forgive others. The fruit of forgiveness received is forgiveness given. How many times does Jesus remind us of this connection? We who have been forgiven must manifest that truth in forgiving others. Perhaps that ought to be our bumper sticker: 'Christians aren't perfect, just forgiving.' I'm afraid the world around us may find that too hard to swallow. They know us all too well."¹

That sounds a lot like Colossians, doesn't it? "Bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other; just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive." It also sounds a lot like the advice Peter gives the believers in Asia Minor about "holy living." Peter strings together a list of imperatives: prepare your minds for action; discipline; discipline yourselves; set all your hope on the grace that Christ Jesus will bring you; do not be conformed to the desires that you formerly had." And, just as Colossians reminds us, "Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony," so too Peter says, "Now that you have purified your souls by your obedience to the truth so that you have genuine mutual love, love one another deeply from the heart." (1 Peter 1:22)

But, as the bumper sticker says, we're not perfect, so how in the world are we supposed to do that? Well, first of all, the scriptures are clear that we are sinners, but the scriptures are just as clear — especially in Paul's letters — that we can't use that as an excuse **not** to live a life worthy of the calling to which [we] have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace." (Ephesians 4:1-3)

The good news is that we don't have "to live a life worthy of the calling to which we have been called" on our own. In fact, we can't. In fact, whenever we try to live a holy life on our own efforts only by following a set of rules, we inevitably end up living a "holier-than-thou" kind of life instead of the kind of holy life God calls us to live. In his commentary on these verses from 1 Peter, Richard Jensen writes, "Being a Christian is all about

being loved by God as the empowering action that enables us to love our neighbor. New people do new things. We are called to become who we are. The Christian doesn't seek to live out the imperatives of the gospel to become a Christian. The Christian lives out the imperatives because she/he is a Christian. Through the living sacrifice of our lives for our neighbors we continually become who we are.”²

The order is important — the imperatives about living a holy life are based on the indicatives of what God has already done for us in Jesus Christ. Indicatives such as — “He who called you is holy; you were ransomed, not with perishable things like silver or gold, but with the precious blood of Christ; through him you have come to trust in God; your faith and hope are set on God; you have purified your souls by your obedience to the truth; you have been born anew; the good news was announced to you.”

The order is important — first, what God has done for us in Jesus Christ; **then**, how we are called to live a holy life in grateful response to what God has done for us in Jesus Christ. Stephen Edmondson writes, “The trust of God engendered in us by Christ’s offer of love serves as the foundation of our obedience. The holiness born in us from this trust in God then opens our hearts to a true love of our neighbor. As in [Martin] Luther, true love is not a work that turns God to us, but a fruit of our turning to God in trust, in response to God’s love in Jesus.”³

In 1529, the great Protestant Reformer Martin Luther published his “Smaller Catechism.” In the introduction to the catechism, Luther pulled no punches in explaining why he wrote it: “The deplorable, miserable conditions which I recently observed when visiting the parishes have constrained and pressed me to put this Catechism of Christian doctrine into this brief, plain, and simple form. How pitiable, so help me God, were the things I saw; the common man, especially in the villages, knows practically nothing of Christian doctrine, and many of the pastors are almost entirely incompetent and unable to teach. Yet all the people are supposed to be Christians, have been baptized, and receive the Holy Sacrament even though they do not know the Our Father, the Creed, or the Ten Commandments and live like poor animals of the barnyard and pigpen.

What these people have mastered, however, is the fine art of tearing all Christian liberty to shreds.”⁴

In his “Small Catechism,” Luther explains the second article of the Apostles’ Creed — “I believe in Jesus Christ, his only Son our Lord” — this way: “I believe that Jesus Christ — true God, Son of the Father from eternity and true man, born of the Virgin Mary — is my Lord. At great cost he has saved and redeemed me, a lost and condemned persons. He has freed me from sin, death, and the power of the devil — not with silver or gold, but with his holy and precious blood and his innocent suffering and death. All this he has done that I may be his own, live under him in his kingdom, and serve him in everlasting righteousness, innocence, and blessedness, just as he is risen from the dead and lives and rules eternity. This is most certainly true.”

Notice the order? “At great cost he has saved and redeemed me . . . All this he has done that I may be his own, live under him, and serve him.” “Holy” means “dedicated or consecrated to God; devoted for God’s use and purpose.” Through Jesus Christ’s death and resurrection, we are dedicated and consecrated to God. A “holy life,” then, is a life devoted for God’s use and God’s purpose. As one writer has put it, “this life means love. Love; genuine, mutual, deep, from the heart. It’s not too much to ask, is it? Love that is genuine — passionate, joyful, full; love that mutual — not self-serving; love that is deep — not passing, frail; love that is from the heart. The love proclaimed here is the same; this love is life-giving, and it is a way of life. Love, the love that is ours in Christ Jesus is not mercy to be felt, it is to be lived.”⁶

I began this sermon with stories from a TV series from the 1960’s and I’ll end this sermon with a story from a character from another TV show that premiered in 1969. Did you ever watch HeeHaw? Talk about corny humor! But it was funny! Perhaps you remember Rev. Grady Nutt who was on the show from 1979-1982. He was Southern Baptist preacher who was known as “the Prime Minister of Humor.” His comedy was mostly about rural Southern Protestantism. He was given 90-120 seconds in a show to put on an improvised routine. Grady Nutt also appeared in other venues. Tragically, he was killed in a plane crash in Alabama in 1982, after one of his shows.

He once told the story about Jesus and the woman caught in adultery. Jesus said to the religious leaders, “Let him among you without sin cast the first stone.” Then Jesus picked up a big, old mossy stone, shoved it under the nose of the first man, and said, “You throw it.” Jesus went on down the line, shoving the stone from one nose to another — “You want to throw it?” Grady Nutt said, “They left, starting with the oldest among them, probably because the longer you live, the less reason you have to throw stones.” When Jesus got to the end of the line and turned around, he saw that they had all left. So Jesus asked the woman where her accusers were. She said, “Lord, none are here,” and Jesus said, “Then neither do I condemn you.” Grady Nutt finished his story with these words: “Do you think you could look forgiveness right in the eye and ever want to sin again?”⁷

“You shall be holy, for I am holy,” says God. Not in a “Holy Hole in a Doughnut Batman!” kind of way. Certainly not in a “holier-than-thou” kind of way. But holy in a set apart for God’s purposes kind of way, holy in a forgiving, loving kind of way, holy because we trust in God who raised Jesus Christ from the dead, so that our faith and hope are set on God.

Let us pray: Blessed be your name, O God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In Christ we are blessed, chosen and called to be blameless and free, to live in the praise of his glorious grace. O God, you have poured out grace upon grace, freely, in great abundance, on us. In Christ we are forgiven, sealed with your Holy Spirit, and released into hope to live for your praise and for glory. Lord, make us more loving, more patient, more faithful – Lord, make us more holy – until we meet again. Amen.

NOTES

¹R.C. Sproul, Jr., “Christians Aren’t Perfect, Just Forgiving,” May 5, 2022 at *Jesus Changes Everything* at www.rcesprouljr.com.

²Richard Jensen, “Commentary on 1 Peter 1:17-23,” April 6, 2008 at www.workingpreacher.org.

³Stephen Edmondson, “1 Peter 1:17-23: Theological Perspective,” in *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary, Year A, Volume 2, Lent Through Eastertide*, David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, editors (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), p. 415.

⁴A.L. Barry, “What about . . . The Small Catechism?” at www.faithlutherancorning.org.

⁵Karl Jacobson, “Commentary on 1 Peter 1:17-23,” May 4, 2014 at www.workingpreacher.org.

⁶Ibid.

⁷Thanks to Bill Butler for recounting this story. I was unable to find a source on Google or YouTube.