

Families Be Holy

WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY

3rd in a six-week series

March 7, 2021

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Leviticus 11:44–45 (Common English Bible)

⁴⁴I am the LORD your God. You must keep yourselves holy and be holy, because I am holy. You must not make yourselves unclean by any swarming creature that crawls on the ground. ⁴⁵I am the LORD, who brought you up from the land of Egypt to be your God. You must be holy, because I am holy.

Romans 12:1-2 (NRSV)

I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. ²Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect.

Ephesians 4:14-16 (NRSV)

¹⁴We must no longer be children, tossed to and fro and blown about by every wind of doctrine, by people's trickery, by their craftiness in deceitful scheming. ¹⁵But speaking the truth in love, we must grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, ¹⁶from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by every ligament with which it is equipped, as each part is working properly, promotes the body's growth in building itself up in love.

Striving to make every moment holy touches every part of our lives, especially our families, the center of our most important relationships.

Yes, our families should seek holiness, but they can become idols, taking precedence over all else. Making our family moments holy takes maturity, wisdom, and, especially if teens are involved, patience. So, today, we are going to talk about our transformation into every more holy, more Christlike, people. Interestingly, as we'll see, the apostle Paul uses metaphors of infants and children to talk about this holy transformation.

Holy?

In her commentary on 1 Peter, Pheme Perkins acknowledges Christians' discomfort when we begin talking about holiness:

"Many Christians find the injunction to 'be holy as God is holy' [Leviticus 11:45, for example] objectionable. After all, we are fragile human beings in need of God's forgiveness, not saints. Matthew's version [in the Sermon on the Mount: 'be perfect as your Father in heaven is perfect'], which uses the word 'perfection,' is even more offensive to those who have grown up with a sense of being unable to fulfill the expectations of a demanding parent. When asked why they felt so angry that such statements were in the Bible, a group of adult parishioners quickly identified the tensions they could not resolve in their lives: (a) mothers who have to work, struggling to meet all the claims on their time; (b) fathers whose careers have been sidetracked in the economic downturn; (c) parents whose adult children are in various sorts of difficulty, and the like. Life is just too tough to have God requiring perfection, they insisted. No doubt 1 Peter's audience could come up with a list of hardships to justify such a conclusion. The letter seeks to encourage them not to slide away from the new life they had adopted as Christians. In today's terms, when the list of obligations and demands on our time seems impossible to manage, God is often the first to go."¹

Growing in holiness is no less and no more than growing in Christlikeness, having the "mind of Christ" (Philippians 2:5), walking as Jesus walked (1 John 2:6) . . . simply loving God and loving neighbor every day and in every way. No small task!

¹Perkins, P. (1995). *First and Second Peter, James, and Jude*. Interpretation, a Bible commentary for teaching and preaching (37). Louisville, KY: John Knox Press.

Ask yourself this: How well would Jesus be weathering the storms of our lives, even this pandemic? Would he be as anxious and fearful as we often are? I think not. What I'd like to be is more like Jesus! Yet, the pressures and anxieties that threaten to drive God from our lives, to squeeze out our commitments to the habits of Christlikeness, can only be pushed aside, as Peter puts it, by disciplining ourselves and setting all our hope on the grace of Jesus Christ. The world wants to force us into its ways of excess and panic, but we are not to allow ourselves to be conformed to such ways. Instead, we need to make a newly energized commitment to putting God first and learning the ways of disciples. In other words, we must grow up in our commitment to a life lived in God's way.

Growing up

Who wants to be called a baby? When I was in elementary school, those were fighting words. But that is pretty much how Paul sees the Christians in Ephesus. He pulls the punch just a bit by saying "we must no longer be children, tossed to and fro" but the sharp point still hits home. To the Christians in Corinth, Paul wrote "And so, brothers and sisters, I could not speak to you as a spiritual people, but rather as people of the flesh, as *infants in Christ*. I fed you with milk, not solid food, for you were not ready for solid food. Even now you are still not ready, for you are still of the flesh" (1 Cor.3:1-3). No punches pulled there.

Is Paul *trying* to be insulting? I don't know whether Paul was going for a little shock value or not, but his point was well taken. These Christians were infants in the faith, Christian novices, fresh enlistees in the body of Christ. When we read Paul's letters in the New Testament, we have to remember that they are largely letters written to small, emerging communities of faith that he himself had founded only a few years before. He is their "senior pastor," writing to his churches to provide guidance, to settle disputes, to teach, to encourage, and to otherwise help these new colonies of God's re-born people to grow toward Christian maturity.

Just try to imagine the journey that lay ahead of these Christians. There were no churches for them to grow up in. No parents or grandparents to turn to. No theological libraries or Bible Academies. No Bibles. Only this strange Good News about a God who gets himself crucified by the Romans. They were asked to give up their belief in the existence of many gods and embrace the Jewish claim that there was only one God. Their embrace of Christ often meant ostracism from their families and friends, for already there were nasty rumors about these followers of Christ, including gruesome whispers of their gathering to eat Jesus' body and to drink his blood.

They had as much to "unlearn" as to learn, as they grew into ever-truer disciples of Christ. In this, we are like them, for nearly all of us carry around unquestioned but misleading assumptions about the Christian proclamation. We think we understand and then are surprised by how much we have to learn and "unlearn."

John Wesley understood this. Though he never earned much respect as a systematic theologian, that was never his goal. Wesley pursued what he called "practical divinity," by which he meant a practical theology. Eugene Peterson calls this "spiritual theology -- the attention we give to keeping what we believe about God (theology) in organic connection with the way we live with God (spirituality)."² It is this "spiritual theology" that Paul speaks to in this week's passages from Romans and Ephesians.

Transformation

In Romans 12:1-2, Paul transitions from Romans 1-11 to chapters 12-16. It is as if Paul has spent the first two-thirds of the letter climbing up the mountain and now, he begins down the other side, examining the Christian life in light of the work of Christ. In this, Paul does not concentrate on Jesus' teachings but on the implications of what Jesus has *accomplished*. And what Jesus has accomplished is so profound, so creation-altering that the only proper response is to offer ourselves, our entire beings, as a living sacrifice, for God has demonstrated that he is worthy of nothing less (v. 1). We can never stay as we once were.

²from Eugene Peterson's thought- and life-provoking book, *Christ Plays in Ten Thousand Places*, Eerdmann's Publishing, 2005, p.4. This book is the first volume in his multi-volume work on what Peterson calls "a conversation in spiritual theology." Peterson is always worth reading . . . slowly.

Our commitment to Christ demands nothing less than our transformation, the complete and utter renewing of our minds such that our *thoughts, feelings, and actions* are conformed to the ways of God. It is the marriage of what we believe about God with how we live with God, the joining of biblical theology and holy living.

How does this transformation happen? How do we “grow up in every way . . . into Christ” (Ephesians 4:15)? It seems, well, impossible so much of the time. There is so much in me that needs transforming. How can I put to death the old self (the living sacrifice) and put on the new self (the renewing of the mind)? Only by the grace of God. This renewing of the mind is the work of God’s Holy Spirit (see Romans 8:5-9). If it were up to us alone we couldn’t get there. Make a trip to Barnes and Noble and count the self-help books. Many of these are filled with excellent advice. The problem is that we just don’t actually do much of it. No, only by grace can we ever hope to live a holy life.

Getting to the truth

This organic connection between what we know about God and how we live with God, depends on our making our way ever closer to the truth about God. But how do we do that? How do we arrive at a trustworthy core of beliefs about the God with whom we live?

The UMC Book of Discipline holds that “Wesley believed that the living core of the Christian faith was revealed in Scripture, illumined by tradition, vivified [to impart vitality] in personal experience, and confirmed by reason.” These four: *Scripture, tradition* (what we’ve gotten from those who came before us), *experience*, and *reason* constitute what has been dubbed the Wesleyan Quadrilateral. A mistake sometimes made is to think that Methodists see the four as equals, merely four complementary means of coming to know the truth about God. But that isn’t it at all. We affirm that Scripture is the primary criterion of what we believe, the measure against which all claims are judged. But we recognize that we learn about God also by listening to those who have come before us (tradition), by seeking to understand our own experience with God and others, and by learning to think well, using our mind as well as our heart.

We Methodists do not desire to be like children, tossed here and there by the latest Jesus fads. Instead, we pray that by “speaking the truth in love,” we will “grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ.” We seek the “renewing of our minds” so that we can “discern what is the will of God,” so that we can grow into “maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ.” May we all embrace a calling to think and to live theologically.

The Family

With all this said, let’s turn to Paul and the family. In several of his letters, Paul included instructions for the family members that can be summed in one word -- mutuality.

These passages in Paul’s letters (also 1 Peter) resemble what the ancients knew as a “household code.” These codes were advice and instruction on how the members of households were to conduct themselves and were common in the ancient world. They outlined duties and responsibilities for the management of one’s private affairs. What is most striking about Paul’s codes is that for every instruction Paul gives the wife or the children, he’s got four instructions for the husband! Why? Because the greatest challenges posed by the Christian life fell on the husband.

In the Greco-Roman world of Paul’s day, the male head of household was all-powerful, the *paterfamilias*, the head of the family. According to Roman law, the *paterfamilias* even had the power to decide whether new-born infants should live or die. For Paul to tell the *paterfamilias* that he is to love and cherish his wife and family as Christ loved and cherished the church – well, I bet that went down hard. Sacrificial love was not the *modus operandi* of most Greco-Roman husbands. Actually doing as Paul instructs would require the *paterfamilias* to set aside willingly all the privileges and prerogatives accorded him by Roman law and social norms.

Paul uses the word “submit” now and then in his codes, conjuring up words like “subordinate” and “sub-par.” How do we handle Paul’s instructions written to a world so different from our own? What would Paul say to husbands and wives today?

Unquestionably, Paul lived and wrote within a patriarchal world which saw women as inferior. Further, the Greek word that Paul uses clearly implies a hierarchy of authority. But if this is all we hear, we miss Paul's dramatic reshaping of marriage relationships among the believers.

In his ministry, Paul does not seek to overthrow the social structures that dominated the ancient world. Paul never advocates the end of slavery. Slavery was a "given" in the ancient world. Likewise, Paul can't conceive of a world in which wives do not defer to their husbands. *But*, Paul does challenge these new Christians' beliefs about the proper exercise of authority and the meaning of power. Indeed, we see this in the responsibilities he gave to women in his ministry, such as to Phoebe and Priscilla.

Marriage is an example of how Paul understood the cross to have reshaped relationships within households. For Paul, husbands are to take the lead in the marriage and in the household, but their model for what this means is Jesus Christ. And for Paul to speak of Christ is to speak of the cross, of Jesus' loving sacrifice for others. Yes, Paul writes, husbands are to take the lead but there is never room for arrogance, bullying, or abuse. They are to love their wives sacrificially and faithfully, just as Jesus loves his people.

All this is a sea-change in Greco-Roman families as Paul strived to help them see that their families and households could make every moment holy.

Scott Engle's Bible Classes

Monday Afternoon Class

A study of the book of Exodus

Meeting on-line at 3pm Monday on Scott's Facebook page. Search for "Scott Engle - St. Andrew UMC."

Tuesday Lunchtime Class

A study of James -- We just started, so now is a great time to join us!

Meeting on-line at 12:00 noon Tuesday on Scott's Facebook page. Search for "Scott Engle - St. Andrew UMC".

About the weekday classes:

Join us whenever you can. Each week's lesson stands on its own. This is very "drop-in." Bring something to eat if you like, wear your pj's.-- we're on-line now so who'd even know. Have a Bible handy.

Both classes are now recorded and are available each week in my new podcast at scottengle.podbean.com. They are also available on Apple podcasts. Search by my name, "Scott Engle".

Scott's Sunday Class

Meeting on Sunday at 11:00 on Scott's Facebook page. Search for "Scott Engle - St. Andrew UMC."

Current series: God's Words: The Vocabulary of Faith

Videos of all three classes are posted on Scott's YouTube channel. Search for "Scott Engle." These videos are posted as soon as possible after class.