



TRUTH APPLICATIONS

Sermon Notes

Be As He Is, Do As He Does

1 Peter 1:15-16

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Surely They Don't Mean That

In *War and Remembrance*, the second of Herman Wouk's two historical novels on World War II, one character asked another to explain what caused Nazi Germany. In reply, he received a discourse on history, philosophy, and theology that traced a chain of attitudes and ideas back to the Reformation. Whether or not one accepts his analysis, the fact that Wouk wrote a scene several pages long dealing with that question in a work of historical fiction says much about the need many have had for a sufficient explanation for Germany's behavior in the 1930s and 40s.

Germany was a nation that had produced some of the world's most influential people; they clearly remained capable of great discoveries and advances. Yet, they were following Adolf Hitler, as evil a ruler as has ever lived. How was that possible? Not all Germans complied, and many who did saw no alternative. Separated as we are by time and geography, we should be cautious in our criticism; we cannot fathom the pressure they faced. But, we are right to condemn evil and question philosophical assumptions. Might does *not* make right. The ends do *not* justify the means. We're sure of that.

Or are we? A Gary Larson *Far Side* cartoon once featured an old man with long hair and a beard sitting at a computer. On the monitor was a picture of a man walking down a street, oblivious to the piano about to fall on him. The old man's finger was poised over a key that said, "Smite." The caption read, "God at His computer."

Is that what God is like? Does he maliciously wield his omnipotence? Are we just feeble creatures at the mercy of his whims? Is "might makes right" okay in his case? If that is what we are saying, then should we be surprised when some wonder why they should *trust* God?

These questions provide a challenge for those of us who recommend obeying God's commands and the pursuit of holiness. But, we do not have to try to convince people to follow a *Far Side* god. The God whom the Bible reveals can be trusted because he *shows* what is best, *knows* what is best, and *wants* what is best for us. This study focuses on the first of these.

The Appeal of a Holy God

Both testaments call God's people to the highest standard of holiness based on the understanding that, because God is holy, his people should be. Peter said it this way:

Therefore, preparing your minds for action, and being sober-minded, set your hope fully on the grace that will be brought to you at the revelation of Jesus Christ. As obedient children, do not be conformed to the passions of your former ignorance, but as he who called you is holy, you also be holy in all your conduct, since it is written, “You shall be holy, for I am holy” (1 Peter 1:13-16; Scripture citations not otherwise designated are from the ESV).

Notice that Peter says it was “written.” “You shall be holy, for I am holy” is from Leviticus 11:44-45, just one text he could have cited. Israel’s covenant commands were grounded in God’s holy nature and character (Lev. 19:2; 20:7; Ex. 20:2).

As in the cultures surrounding Old Testament Israel, the idea of a holy God would not have gone unnoticed in the Greco-Roman world. Many were disillusioned with gods known for immorality, arbitrary behavior, and cruelty. Bruce Metzger has summarized a prominent attitude:

Genuine belief in the reality of the ancient gods and goddesses of classical mythology had long since given way to widespread agnosticism. Through their plays Euripides and Aristophanes ridiculed the foibles and follies of the Olympian deities, and Euhemerus explained that the gods were originally men who had distinguished themselves either as warriors or benefactors of mankind, and who after their death were accorded divine honors from their grateful people.¹

One need know only a little about the gods as presented in the myths to understand their skepticism. Zeus, ruler of Mt. Olympus, was as immoral as he was powerful. He had mated with at least twelve females, both goddesses and mortals. His first wife was his sister, Hera, the queen of Olympus, who devoted herself to the destruction of Zeus’s other children. Among them was a daughter borne by his sister, Demeter. Named Persephone, she was kidnapped and raped by her uncle, Hades.

The amazing thing would have been if gods like that had ever commanded respect! They had no credibility to call people to high standards of behavior. When Christians said they followed a holy God who called them to such high standards, they were saying something completely at odds with what their neighbors had generally heard. This was different.

“Do As I Do”

In making an appeal to imitate a holy God, the Christians were saying something that was different in another way. To say, “You shall be holy, for I am holy” was to present a God who escaped the weakness of an ethic that says, “Do as I say, not as I do.” Given human frailties, we know how hard it is to say that and the weaknesses of demands made by those who cannot say it.

Scripture’s God is different. Even when he commands a nation’s destruction, the reason is the sin which separates them from his holy presence (Isa. 59:1-2; Hab. 1:13), not arbitrary cruelty on God’s part (see Lev. 18:24-28; 1 Kgs. 21:26; 2 Kgs. 16:3). Furthermore, there are numerous cases — most often with Israel, but with others, too — where God refrained from destroying a people and instead offered a way back (e.g., Jer. 18:7-10; Hos. 11:1-9; Jon. 3:6-4:11).

Beyond that, God lived among us, demonstrating his holiness in the flesh (see John 1:14; 14:9; Heb. 4:15; 1 Pet. 2:21-25). Jesus didn’t say, “live this way, or else,” but, “You therefore must be perfect, *as your heavenly Father is perfect*” (Matt. 5:48).

¹ Bruce M. Metzger, *The New Testament: Its Background, Growth and Content*, 3rd Ed., Rev. (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2003), 73.

From Being to Doing

What will imitating God's holiness look like in practice? All of 1 Peter answers that; we will focus only on what he says in his first major section (1:13-2:3).

First, holiness is the expected response to salvation, a subject Peter introduces in 1:3-12. He writes of the living hope to which they had been born again. This was the "salvation," the "good news" that had been "preached" to them.

Verse 13 begins with "therefore" (διό, *dio*), indicating that what follows derives from what has been said. Peter says that our hope is to be "set . . . fully on the grace" that will be brought when Jesus is revealed (1:13). We do that because we have been "ransomed from the futile ways inherited from [our] forefathers, . . . with the precious blood of Christ" (1:18-19). Consequently, we have been "purified . . . by obedience to the truth" (1:22). If we truly appreciate the goodness of the Lord, we will devote ourselves to growing in holiness (2:2-3).

Second, being holy means that we should expect to be different from our culture. "Do not comply with the evil urges you used to follow in your ignorance, but like the Holy One who called you, become holy in all your conduct" (1:14-15, NET). Living this way has always been a challenge; it remains so today. Some major in minors, stressing things that are of little consequence, but do get them noticed as "different." Of greater concern, however, is that so many minor in majors. We find ways to justify relaxing demands on things that really do matter, so much so that at times it is hard to discern a real difference between the church and the world.

How do we avoid this danger? By doing something else many find to be different: thinking. We must "prepar[e] [our] minds for action" and be "sober-minded" (1:13). Holiness does *not* just happen, magically coming to us as we drift along with culture. We must think about culture's practices to distinguish between minor things that don't matter and major things that do.

Third, holiness must begin at home. Being purified by the truth, we are to practice "sincere brotherly love" and "love one another earnestly from a pure heart" (1:22). How? Peter answers, "So get rid of all evil and all deceit and hypocrisy and envy and all slander" (2:1, NET). Christians have sometimes treated the world better than Christian brothers and sisters? To be serious about holiness is to we commit to a different way, the key to which is found in 2:2: "Like newborn infants, long for the pure spiritual milk, that by it you may grow up into salvation."

Given What We Most Need

A Sunday school teacher, committed to faithfulness, once said, "I can't be teaching kids how to keep the Lord's Day holy while my cash registers are ringing." Most of you would recognize that teacher if you saw his picture. But you'll know him for his company, not his Sunday school class. He is S. Truett Cathy, founder of Chik-Fil-A, famous for "inventing the chicken sandwich" — and for closing his stores on Sunday.²

We are blessed when we find such good examples to encourage us. But, it is always best to look higher, at the one who always gets it right. "Like the Holy One who called you, become holy yourselves in all of your conduct" (1 Pet. 1:15, NET).

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² Edward K. Rowell, ed., *Quotes & Idea Starters for Preaching & Teaching from Leadership Journal* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1996), 147.