

West Van Baptist, September 20
Good Behavior, Good Reasons
1 Peter 1:13-25

I. Instructions and reasons

There's an old joke about a man who didn't want to go to church. He sat in bed on Sunday morning, looked over at his wife (who was getting dressed), and said, "I don't want to go to church."

"Why not?" she asked.

"Three reasons. It's too early in the morning and I'm tired. I don't like the music they play. And nobody there likes me and I don't have any friends."

"Hmm," said his wife. "Well, I have 3 reasons why you should go. First, you're a grown man, not a child, and you should show some self-discipline. Second, it's good for you spiritually. And third, you're the pastor."

It's just a joke. I like coming to church, and I appreciate my many friends here. But it's a reminder that people have reasons for the things they do. Sometimes we have good reasons, sometimes not-so-good. Part of growing—as people and as Christians—is learning to do the right things, for the right reasons.

That's what this morning's Scripture is about. The Apostle Peter invites us to grow in good behavior, and to do so for good reasons.

By way of context if you've missed the past couple weeks: we are studying the book of 1 Peter. This letter was written by Peter, Jesus' disciple and key leader in the early church. It was sent from Rome to churches scattered across central and northern Turkey. Peter wrote near the end of his life, a few years before he was executed by the Emperor Nero. His first readers were Christians living in a competitive, often dangerous world, facing personal challenges and the threat of persecution for their faith. Peter wanted to help these believers grow in God's grace and peace, even in a world full of trouble.

The letter begins with a brief introduction and a prayer of praise for God's mercy. Peter describes God's plan to deliver us from sin and prepare us for a wonderful, eternal life with Him. Right now we live "in-between," freed from the old life but not yet fully in the new. Still God is with us, helping, protecting, encouraging, and giving us joy as we trust Him.

In today's section Peter turns from praise to practical instruction.

He launches in with a "therefore." This reminds me of letters written by the Apostle Paul. Paul had a habit of teaching truth about God and salvation, then inserting a big "therefore...", then applying the truth to our lives. Sometimes Paul structured whole epistles that way: doctrine in the first half, then directions in the second. Peter follows a similar strategy. However, rather than splitting his letter in two, Peter goes back and forth and back and forth between truth and application. We'll see this all the way through 1 Peter, beginning in this morning's passage.

Peter's "therefore" is set in a transitional verse. He follows up with 3 paragraphs, each giving instruction and each offering good reason for that instruction.

II. Transition: think clearly!

Therefore, prepare your minds for action and exercise self-control. Put all your hope in the gracious salvation that will come to you when Jesus Christ is revealed to the world (1:13).

Peter has summarized the gospel, the good news about God's plan to save us through Jesus. How should we respond to this? There will be many "therefore's" in this letter. The first, foundational one is about having our minds in the right place. Peter's readers have become Christians by hearing and receiving the message. Yet their faith will not stay healthy, and they will not apply it well if they aren't thinking right. Again, it's interesting to compare this with what Paul writes. My mind goes immediately to Romans 12:2: *Do not be conformed to the world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind.*

Here at West Van Baptist Church, we do our best to be safety conscious and prepared to help if anyone needs it. For example, we have an AED—an automated external defibrillator—in case someone gets really excited during worship and they have a heart attack. I don't think we've ever had to use it yet, and hope we never do. Still it's here, and in an emergency it could save a life.

It could save a life *if we understand it and use it correctly*. It comes with instructions, printed on the side. They're fairly simple. Read them carefully and follow them, and the AED will do its job. On the other hand, this device won't help the way it's supposed to if I hit the patient on the chest with it, or put the paddles on his ears, or simply fail to turn the power on. I need to "think right" about what this device is and how to maintain and use it. Otherwise it won't bring the benefits it was designed to bring.

Peter has described God's amazing, powerful plan to bring us new life. Now he insists that we need to understand the message—what does it mean and how does it work?—so we can live accordingly. We need to think right!

He makes the point with 3 short statements.

- *Prepare your minds for action.* Older, more literal translations say, "*gird your minds for action.*" Imagine you're wearing a long robe, but you need to run somewhere. How do you prepare so that you won't trip? You tie the robe up with a belt. Peter is saying that we need to be prepared when we study and think about the gospel, clearing distractions out of the way. This makes sense. There have been days when I went into a class unready to listen to the teacher; I was tired, distracted, and not really paying attention. I didn't learn much on those days. If I want to understand, appreciate, and apply God's Word I need to come alert and ready to engage it.
- In the version we read this morning, the next phrase is *exercise self-control*. This captures the idea, but most translations use a different phrase that's even more precise. They say: *keep sober*. If someone is drunk, they won't be able to prepare their mind for action. Other things control their thoughts. This is a real risk today. Our minds can be controlled by many things, especially in a world where media and electronic devices constantly flash messages at

us. Not every message is consistent with God’s Word, and some intentionally seek to distort the gospel. We need to be sober—self-controlled in our thinking—making sure our minds are being shaped by God’s Word and His Spirit.

- Peter adds: *Put all your hope in the gracious salvation that will come to you when Jesus Christ is revealed.* This is a comment about focus and priorities. All around us there are voices saying, “Put your trust in me; I can make you happy.” If we really believe that God offers us the best news and the best hope through Jesus, then we should be focusing our attention on His Word first and foremost, and anchoring our hope to Him.

Peter has reminded us about the good news of God’s gracious salvation in Jesus. It’s wonderful, life-giving news. It’s like an AED for a dying soul. But if we want to receive the full benefit of that gospel message, we need to understand it clearly—to think right.

This sets the context for everything else Peter will say in this morning’s passage and through the rest of his letter. Living as we should begins with a clear understanding of who God is and what He has done.

III. Be holy

With that reminder in place, Peter offers a first word of instruction. He tells us we must be holy.

*You must live as God’s obedient children. Don’t slip back into your old ways of living to satisfy your own desires. You didn’t know any better then. But now **you must be holy** in everything you do, just as God who chose you is holy. For the Scriptures say, “You must be holy because I am holy.”*

In the Bible “holiness” has several dimensions, all related to being “separate.” God is greater than creation, separate from it, not part of it. At a smaller level, a person or thing can be treated as special, kept separate from ordinary things. And holiness can describe purity, being separate from sin and anything unclean or unhealthy. Here, the context makes it clear that Peter has purity in mind. He warns us: *don’t slip back into your old ways of living*—the proud, selfish, immoral lifestyle that God has saved us from.

This isn’t a new idea. From Genesis to Revelation the Bible insists that we must be holy. Without holiness, no one can see God. Without holiness we fall under His judgment. Holiness is a non-negotiable.

God’s Word isn’t primarily concerned with teaching us how to be nice. Niceness matters, it’s a good thing. But Scripture emphasizes our need to be *pure*—which is a quite different matter. A person can be nice but still hold on to a whole collection of sinful habits and attitudes. We see that all around us: people who are friendly and pleasant, but whose hearts have a selfish streak, with no place for God and no interest in following Him. Holiness is different. True holiness means that *all* the sin has been scrubbed away. There isn’t a secret room or cupboard in the person’s heart where leftover sin is still allowed to live. Not even those so-called “little” sins.

Scripture views sin much the way we view cancer. Nobody thinks it’s OK to have “a little bit of cancer”—to be generally healthy, but with a “little bit of cancer” growing in your pancreas and

bones. We understand that cancer spreads, and it's always potentially deadly. So our goal is to be completely cancer-free. Being holy, or pure, is like being morally cancer-free.

Today we're talking about good behavior—and good reasons. Did you notice that Peter tells us why we need to be holy? In part it's common sense, if sin is like cancer. But Peter goes further. He reminds us that when we embrace Jesus we become God's children. With a Heavenly Father who loves us and who has done so much for us, it makes sense that we would want to be *obedient children*, eager to follow His instructions. Furthermore, God plans for us to live with Him. We will need to be like Him if we're going to live together on happy terms. God is absolutely pure Himself; there is no sin in His character, His thoughts, words, or actions. In fact, He finds sin—every sin, even those “little” sins—disgusting. So it's only reasonable that we would want to leave every trace of sin behind.

If I know that my wife absolutely can't stand a certain scent of cologne, I avoid that cologne. I don't wear “just a little” of it in the hope she won't notice. I won't have any in the house! Similarly, *Now you must be holy in everything you do, just as God who chose you is holy.*

We don't earn God's love by being holy. He loves us because that's who He is; and He saves us because He is merciful. The gospel is a joyful message; it frees us from the burden of trying to deserve God's goodness.

Still, if we truly love God, if we consider Him our Father and hope to live with Him, we won't be careless about sin. We will pursue purity, with the help of the Holy Spirit. This will require some discipline and effort and growth. But *there is a good reason for it.*

This is a practical message for you and me. We are called to be obedient children, leaving behind the sins that were part of our pre-Christian life, living as holy people because God is holy.

How do we do this? We spend time in Scripture, learning what God is like, and what He does and doesn't want us to be like. We pray: “Lord, help me to see the places in my life where I need to change. Make me sensitive to sin.” And when we feel God's Spirit convicting us about something that needs to change, we don't make excuses or brush it off. We determine to make the change, praying for God's help, and sometimes inviting our brothers and sisters to hold us accountable.

IV. Be amazed and awestruck

Peter gives us a second directive: *Remember that the heavenly Father to whom you pray has no favorites. He will judge or reward you according to what you do. So you must **live in reverent fear of Him** during your time here as “temporary residents” (1:17).*

The main point here is living in “reverent fear.” This is another idea we find throughout the Bible. And we need to think clearly about it.

You and I feel fear for a number of reasons.

- Sometimes it's a response to things we don't understand. That's not Peter's point. God has made Himself known to us.

- Sometimes we fear people and things that are hostile or evil, out to harm us. That's not the point either. God is loving, not hostile.
- We fear things that are unsafe, maybe not hostile, but still likely to injure us. Again, that's not what Peter is describing. He has already stressed that God wants to protect and help.
- Then there is the fear we feel when confronted by grandeur, by things that are so large and powerful they overwhelm our senses, our understanding, and our ability to be in control. There can be delight in that kind of fear, though it also involves vulnerability and a sense of our smallness. It's not about being threatened, though it motivates us to be careful. It's what people experience on top of large cliffs, in thunderstorms, or near crashing waves on the ocean shore.

This last picture is what the Bible means by "reverent fear." It could also be described as living in awestruck wonder or humble amazement. God is good and kind, not cruel and wanting to harm us. But He is very big, very strong, very intelligent, very old, very pure. When we catch even a glimpse of what He is really like, we find that we have no words, and we just might fall on our faces. We speak and walk cautiously, with great respect. Only fools believe they can be casual when they come up close and personal with the Lord Almighty.

Again, Peter supplies reasons for this instruction. Why should we live in reverent fear, in awestruck wonder and humble amazement of God? Well, He is great and pure. Yes, He is our Father in heaven, but He has no favorites—He doesn't bend the rules for anyone. He still judges and rewards, because He is holy.

Yet Peter doesn't stop there. He spends more time on another reason for humble amazement. He reminds us of the great price God paid to free us from the old life and offer us a new and better one. *You know God paid a ransom to save you from the empty life you inherited from your ancestors. And it was not paid with mere gold or silver, which lose their value. It was the precious blood of Christ, the sinless, spotless Lamb of God (1:18-19).*

God's greatness is amazing. His holiness is wonderful and terrifying. His love and grace? These go beyond all description. They should leave us amazed and awestruck and totally overwhelmed.

If someone gave me a ticket to a football game, that would be lovely, and I'd be thankful. But imagine living in a war-torn country where the enemy is searching for you to kill you. Imagine a friend sacrificing his life to help you escape across the border and into freedom. How would that kind of gift make you feel? Amazed? Awestruck? Overwhelmed? Ask Peter why we should live in amazement, and his main answer is: "Because God has paid the ultimate price to set you free."

This is a practical message for you and me. We are called to live in humble amazement and awestruck wonder: at who God is, and at the astonishing love He has shown, paying the highest price to set us free.

How do we do this? We keep centering our minds on these truths. We sing about them. We take time away from our phones and other distractions and meditate on them. We read good books that teach and illustrate them. We talk together about them. We pray for a fresh awareness: "Lord, please help me to feel the wonder of Your love anew every day."

V. Be genuinely loving with each other

Peter finishes this section with a third charge. It also is a message we find everywhere in the Bible: we must love each other. *You were cleansed from your sins when you obeyed the truth, so now **you must show sincere love to each other** as brothers and sisters. Love each other deeply with all your heart (1:22).*

Again, love is more than being nice. I can smile and shake hands and act pleasant with someone and still be angry, bitter, and cold-hearted toward them on the inside. That's not how Jesus loves us, and it isn't the kind of love He wants us to have for one another. We are called to have *sincere love*. Literally the word Peter uses is "not-hypocritical" love. We're called to care about each other and seek the best for each other, in our inner attitudes as well as our outer actions. It must come from the heart.

I don't know about you, but I don't naturally love this way. At least, I don't naturally love *everyone* this way. Peter understands. He reminds us that God doesn't expect us to love others in our own strength. As we saw last week, the heart of the gospel is a promise that Jesus gives us a new birth and a new life. This isn't just a life that will last forever (that it will do that). It's a new *kind* of life, where the old, selfish, sinful nature is left behind and God's Spirit creates His own character in us. It's a new life that is capable of loving the way God loves, not because we can do this ourselves, but because God creates it in us.

Peter says: *Love each other deeply ... for you have been born again, but not to a life that will quickly end. Your new life will last forever because it comes from the eternal, living word of God (1:23).*

These words are an encouragement. They also point to the reasons for Peter's instruction. Why should we love each other? It flows naturally from holiness. If we've been cleansed from our sins and our old ways, and if we're begun obeying Jesus' words, then of course we'll love as He commanded rather than living selfishly. And love is a natural result of new birth. When God puts His own spiritual life in us, it doesn't just make love possible. His nature becomes more and more our nature, and love *must* begin to fill our hearts and flow out to others. The fruit of the Spirit is, first of all, love! *Of course* we will grow in love that is sincere, from the heart, if God's life is in us.

Again, this is a practical message for you and me. We are called to love one another deeply and sincerely. We're to do this because it's right and Jesus told us we should. And we do it because love is a spiritual sign-of-life, an indicator that we have truly understood the gospel message and we're being transformed by God's Spirit. Loving shouldn't be a "grit your teeth and struggle" kind of exercise. As Jesus works in us, it should become more and more natural.

There are some things we can do to encourage the process. We can go back and look again at God's amazing love for us, giving us His own Son. We can remind ourselves that God loves those other people just as much as He loves me—and make a disciplined effort to see others through Jesus' eyes. We can, and must pray for those around us, for their good, and because praying for them helps us to love them. Of course we can and must pray that God will help us to love better and better.

VI. Summing up

Sixteen-year-old Terri sat on the sofa, earbuds blasting music, scrolling through posts on her phone, pouting and sulking. She was not having a fun evening. Terri had hoped to go over to a friend's house, but Mom and Dad said no, tonight we need to have some family time together. They had shared dinner, somewhat uncomfortably. Now Terri sat waiting to see what kind of stupid activity her parents had in mind. They were so unreasonable!

Mom interrupted her sulk with a surprising request: "Hey Terri, get your coat—you and I are going out." "OK.... Sigh," and Terri gathered her things. This didn't sound like a family night. But whatever... and she and Mom hopped in the car.

It wasn't a cheerful drive. However, 20 minutes later when they approached the city stadium, Terri sat straighter and looked more closely out the window. The billboard on the gate said something about a concert—featuring her favorite band. "Wait, what? Where are we going?"

Mom smiled: "We're going to the concert. Dad and I wanted to surprise you with this. We thought you'd like it." This brought reluctant smile in return, a happier evening, and a good lesson. Sometimes when Mom and Dad ask you to do something or not to do it, they have good reasons.

Peter challenges his readers, including us, to do some good things, and to do them for good reasons. This is important. Too often people have the idea that Christian faith is a bunch of irritating do's and don'ts that are forced on us to make us "nice" people and to take away all our fun. That has never been the case, at least not in healthy, biblical Christian faith.

Yes, we need to leave behind some old ways—because those ways were unhealthy and destructive. Yes, we need to be holy, pure—because this frees us from the sin that pulls us down and allows us to live joyfully with our Heavenly Father. Yes, we need to live in reverent fear, in humble amazement—because God *is* amazing, and the extent of His love for us is so much more than we can understand. Yes, we need to love each other, the people we find easy to love and the ones we don't. We need to love them sincerely, from the heart—because God loves them, and He is forming His own character in us.

God calls us to good behavior, for good reasons. We'll see this all the way through 1 Peter, and you'll find the same thing everywhere in the Bible. I pray that as we study God's Word, His good reasons will become clearer and clearer, helping us to live in obedience, and filling us with joy.