

A Sermon  
Rev. W. Kevin Holder  
Grace Baptist Church  
Bryans Road, Maryland  
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## **Your True Self**

1 Peter 1:13-25

So far in his letter, the writer of 1 Peter has been leading the congregation in an outburst of praise. The folks in pews have been shouting "Hallelujah!" and "Thank you, Lord!" for the gifts that God has bestowed on his people through the death and resurrection of Jesus. New birth. Living hope. A heavenly inheritance. Growing faith. God's protective power. Inexpressible and glorious joy. The salvation of your souls. And all God's people said, "Amen."

But there's more to this sermon than just declarations of what God has done. Something needs to be said about what the people should do. The writer knows that he can't send the congregation out the church doors and into the world without getting more specific about the kinds of behavior that are appropriate for people who have been claimed by God and belong to God. The God to whom they belong reminds them that he's holy. So they need to be like him. They need to be holy.

One of the terms we often associate with holiness is "sanctification." It means that we're called to be holy, and that God is in the process of making us holy through the work of the Spirit. John Wesley, one of the great figures in the Methodist movement, used the analogy of a house to describe this ongoing experience of growing in holiness. He said that prevenient grace, that is, God's divine love that reaches out to us and awakens in us our need for deliverance, is like the front porch. Justification, that is, pardon or forgiveness, is the door. And sanctification, that is, progress in holiness, is what enables us to walk around in the rooms of the house.

At the beginning of today's text, the writer is reminding the worshipers that they have to do more than just step through the door of the house. They need to walk around in its rooms. They need to occupy this space called holiness, so that they participate in, embody, and reflect the very character of God in his own holiness. He's the one who has called them. Now they need to live out their call.

"So roll up your sleeves and get ready to go to work." That's essentially what the writer tells them using the expression "gird the loins of your mind." Or, picking up on another metaphor, the writer says, "Sober up." The Greek term is translated as "be self-controlled" or "be disciplined." The word literally means "be sober" as opposed to drunk. In other words, people like you, people who have been reborn by the power of God, people who are waiting for Jesus to be fully unveiled and the reign of God to be complete, people who have the kind of hope that you have, need to be clearheaded and focused. Remember that there's no such thing as holiness without self-control.

Earlier this week, with the beginning of Lent, lots of people girded up their loins and began a journey into what they hope will be a period of greater spiritual discipline and growth in holiness. That usually involves exercising some self-control by abstaining from something, or giving something up, for Lent. This year, the Twitter Lent Tracker has helped us follow in real time what Twitter users say they intend to give up. As of late in the week, several of the familiar Lenten sacrifices were ranking up near the top once again: technology, social

networking, chocolate, alcohol, meat, sweets, chips, and swearing. Maybe some of these are on your own list, year round. Even if you're not someone who thinks much about Lent or observes it, you may have considered changes and sacrifices you can make in your own patterns of living, things that will help you focus more on the imperishable than on the perishable.

Those are actually the two alternatives put before us in today's text, and throughout 1 Peter. Two ways of living. Two choices about where to direct the self. The self can be directed toward perishable things or toward imperishable realities. On the one hand are the things of this present world that's passing away, such as material possessions and riches. On the other hand are the things of the world to come, the world awaited by people who, as the writer says, "set [their] hope fully on the grace to be given [them] when Jesus Christ is revealed."

Jonathan Kozol wrote a book about the people of the Bronx. At one point he contrasts two citizens of New York. On the one hand is a newspaper columnist who has given up on invisible realities and the kind of hope rooted in the purposes of God. She writes: "All right. . . . Out there, someone is sleeping on a grate. . . . and the emergency rooms are full of people. . . . [Still] cruelty is as natural to the city as fresh air is to the country. . . . I used to feel this cruelty was wrong, immoral. . . . Now I don't know. Maybe it's the fuel that powers the palace." On the other hand is a boy named Anthony who has grown up with very little of the columnist's security and worldly wealth. Anthony has his heart set on another vision. He aspires to be a writer, and expresses his hope for God's kingdom: "God's Kingdom. . . . God will be there. He'll be happy that we have arrived. "People shall come hand-in-hand. . . . "God will be fond of you."<sup>1</sup> Two contrasting visions of life and the world, and the difference it makes when you have your focus set on the imperishable realities of God's reign.

Wherever you find that kind of kingdom focus, you find self-control. Not self-control in the sense of your own human determination and willpower, your own capacity to overcome attraction to evil, but self-control in the sense of God's own character, God's holiness shaping you as you live in relationship with God. From a Christian standpoint, self-control isn't about your own strength. It's about God's strength working in you. It's about God taking some of what he has promised us in the future, and putting it to work in us in the here and now. It's about what the writer calls "receiving the goal of your faith, the salvation of your souls" (1:9).

There's a professor named Loran Nordgren who has done a lot of research on the psychological processes that guide how we think and act. In one study, he did an experiment that placed college students in tempting situations to smoke, eat junk food, or forego studying. His research found that we often display what's called a "restraint bias." This means that we tend to overestimate how much self-control we will have against temptation when we're not in the "heat of the moment." This causes us to think that we can handle more temptation than we actually can. Based on his findings, Nordgren warns, "Those who are most confident about their self-control are the most likely to give in to temptation."<sup>2</sup>

As Christians, our confidence isn't in our own self-control, but in the power of the God who has called us, the God who raised Jesus Christ from the dead. Our faith and hope are in him and his capacity to make us holy. Apart from his power, each of us is at risk of becoming just a bundle of urges and ill-directed desires. That's not God's purpose for you. That's not the self God created you to be. In order to be your true self, the self God has called you to be, you need self-control in the sense of spiritual sobriety and alertness.

One of the reasons you need to be spiritually focused and on your toes is because self-control figures into so many dimensions of daily life. Self-control in what you eat. Self-control in what you say. Self-control in your sexual desires. Self-control in how you drive. Self-control in your use of money. Self-control in what you watch. Self-control in your study habits. Self-control in how you manage time. Self-control in how you handle relationships. Assemble all the moments, experiences, activities, tasks, and relationships of each day, and it becomes clear that the course and condition of your life is heavily influenced by the way that you exercise self-control.

Exercise is actually a good term for it. As others have pointed out, self-control is like a muscle. It needs to be used and exercised. The more you do so, the more your self-control gets strengthened and developed. The more you grow in spiritual discipline. The more you sharpen your focus on things that are eternal rather than things that are passing. The more you stop going through life just trying to grab everything you can, the more you can lay hold of what truly lasts. The more that you forego instant gratification or short term satisfaction, the more you can possess things that are imperishable.

Not so that you can take pride in your own spiritual discipline and win praise from others, but so that you can bring praise to God. Years ago, on "The Merv Griffin Show," one of the guests was a body builder. During the interview, Merv asked him, "Why do you develop those particular muscles?" The body builder simply stepped forward and flexed a series of well-defined muscles from chest to calf. The audience applauded. So Merv asked again, "What do you use all those muscles for?" Again the muscular specimen flexed, and his biceps and triceps sprouted to impressive proportions. But Merv persisted, "What do you use those muscles for?" The body builder was bewildered. He didn't really have an answer other than to display his well-developed frame.<sup>3</sup> So it is with the way that we develop self-control. We do so not to impress others, but for the larger purpose of practicing God's kingdom and strengthening the community of his people. As Sir Alec Paterson once put it, "O God, help us to be masters of ourselves that we may be servants of others."

It takes others in order for you to be spiritually sober and self-controlled. You can't master yourself on your own. That, as we've seen, takes the power of God. And it takes the community of God's people. In today's text, the writer reminds us that self-control is an indispensable part of holiness. And holiness builds community, a community of mutual love and support. In other words, we need each other's help to develop self-control. None of us can be his or her true self without the other selves in this congregation.

So self-control is a group project. God has given us the church as a fellowship where we help sanctify one another. Together we grow into the holiness of God. And that's not an easy or painless process. We all know from our experience in the church that there are plenty of occasions and experiences where we have to exercise self-control with one another. But that's part of how we stay spiritually alert. That's part of how we learn to love one another "deeply, from the heart" (v. 22). And as we do, we help one another live out the call of God. We help one another live lives where we forego things that are temporary for things that endure. We help one another stay focused on the imperishable rather than the perishable. We help one another set our hope on the goal of our faith, the salvation to be given when Jesus Christ is revealed.

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<sup>1</sup> Jonathan Kozol, *Amazing Grace: The Lives of Children and the Conscience of a Nation* (New York: Crown, 1995) 237-38.

<sup>2</sup> Jeanna Bryner, "Temptation Harder to Resist Than You Think, Study Suggests," *Live Science* (August 3, 2009).

<sup>3</sup> Illustrations for Preaching and Teaching: From *Leadership Journal*, ed. Craig Brian Larson (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1993) 237.