

DISCIPLE

THE BIBLE TEACHING

Holy means set apart for God. A chalice is set apart for Holy Communion, not used for orange juice at breakfast. A sanctuary is set apart for worship, not used for roller skating on Saturday night. In a secular world, some things are set apart as sacred.

Holy has the same root as words like *whole*, *wholesome*, *holistic*, *heal*, *health*, and *hallow*. To be holy is to be whole, clean, healthy, harmonious.

We learned from the beginning that God called a special people to be set apart, to be different, to be “peculiar.” First Peter assumes that the Christian community has now become the “set-apart people,” a “peculiar” people.

Baptism

Some scholars think First Peter may have been a baptismal sermon before it became a general letter to the churches of Asia Minor. Baptismal images abound. The words “he has given us a new birth into a living hope” (1 Peter 1:3) not only recall our Lord’s appeal to Nicodemus (John 3:3) but also Paul’s allusion to the death of self and resurrection with Christ in baptism (Romans 6:4). In First Peter, we have a strong emphasis on the new creation in Christ rather than only on a washing away of sin’s stain. A baptized Christian is born anew and lives in a new community. Baptism, like circumcision of old, signifies initiation into the corporate life of God’s people.

First Peter reminds us that in Noah’s flood eight persons were “saved through water,” and compares this deliverance to the saving power of baptism. “Baptism, which this prefigured, now saves you—not as a removal of dirt from the body, but as an appeal to God for a good conscience, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ” (1 Peter 3:21). Of course, Christian baptism also calls to memory the *deliverance* in the crossing of the water of the Red Sea and the *promise* in the walking through the water of the river Jordan.

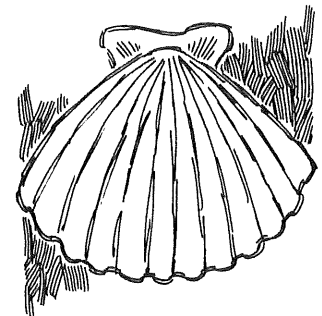
In an arid country, minimal amounts of water were available. The early church used the scallop shell for baptism and ultimately ruled that three drops of water were minimal for baptism in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

When you see a person baptized in the church, in what ways do you believe that person is “set apart”?

Blood

Just as the Hebrews in Egypt sprinkled their doorposts with the blood of the sacrificial lamb (Exodus 12:21-23; 12:5), the

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The scallop shell with drops of water falling from it was an early symbol of the baptism of Jesus. Early art shows John the Baptist pouring water onto the head of Jesus with such a shell.

holy people (priests and people) were sprinkled with blood (24:8; 29:21), and so later Christians have symbolically been sprinkled with the blood of Christ. “You were ransomed . . . with the precious blood of Christ, like that of a lamb without defect or blemish” (1 Peter 1:18-19). As Christians, we remember the divine sacrifice when we drink the cup of wine in Holy Communion and when we sing hymns of God’s grace, atonement, and forgiveness. As you think about receiving Holy Communion, in what ways have you understood yourself and others to be “set apart”?

The Cornerstone of the New Temple

Without question, something world-changing happened in Jesus Christ. As predicted, the Temple in Jerusalem was destroyed, but a new holy temple was built to glorify God and to save people. This temple is constructed of the faithful followers of Jesus Christ.

The cornerstone, a dramatic Old Testament image, is Jesus Christ himself. People thought the stone was unworthy, so they tossed it aside. But God claimed it.

“The stone that the builders rejected
has become the very head of the corner” (1 Peter 2:7;
Psalm 118:22).

Paul wrote of the crucified Christ as “a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles” (1 Corinthians 1:23).

List some ways Jesus Christ is a stumbling block or a rejected stone for many people today.

The Covenant People

In the Old Testament, elderly Abraham and Sarah were called to found a “chosen people,” to walk out in faith, turning away from idols. They and their offspring formed a covenant community characterized by trust in the one God, rest on the sabbath, hospitality to strangers, male circumcision, the tithe, family loyalty, and rejection of infant sacrifice. Later the covenant people were commanded to be unusually compassionate with the poor, especially careful with the weak, and never forgetful that they too were once helpless slaves in the land of Egypt (Leviticus 19). With the giving of the Mosaic food laws (Leviticus 11), the covenant people became increasingly “peculiar.” Then they were really set apart.

But as we have learned, instead of being humbly set apart

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for service, the Pharisees of Jesus' day broke hospitality with the world and withdrew into a rigid adherence to the Law that resulted in self-righteous aloofness. They became "holier-than-thou" rather than holy as God is holy. That can happen. Describe how you have seen it happen sometimes to Christians.

The Levites, you recall, were especially "set apart." Not only were they Israelites, but they were the one tribe not given any land. They were to be the priests, dedicated to the Lord, offering the continual sacrifices, eating the food of God, transmitting and administering divine law, working continually with holy things. No wonder God was angry when Eli's sons failed as priests (1 Samuel 2:12-17).

Now, First Peter tells us we are to be "a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people" (1 Peter 2:9). What does that mean? We are called to be holy because *our God is holy*. Look again at the demands of this holy God to get some clues about what it means to be holy (Leviticus 19). Then notice the descriptions in First Peter of the new Christian community: self-disciplined (1 Peter 1:13); "obedient children," not conformed to "the desires that you formerly had in ignorance" (1:14); obedient "to the truth," showing "genuine mutual love . . . from the heart" (1:22). This new holy priesthood of all believers is supposed to rid themselves "of all malice, and all guile, insincerity, envy, and all slander" (2:1). As "a holy priesthood" we are to "offer spiritual sacrifices" (2:5), abstaining from "the desires of the flesh" (2:11). We must conduct ourselves "honorably among the Gentiles [for us that would be the world], so that . . . they may see your honorable deeds and glorify God" (2:12). We are to be distinctively honest, humble, and caring.

"For the Lord's sake accept the authority of every human institution" (2:13). Apparently, unless state loyalty meant denial of God or God's work (Acts 4:19-20), Christians were to show respect and obedience to civil authority, pay their taxes, honor the emperor. Later, as we will see in Revelation, when Rome demanded worship of the emperor rather than honor, Christians refused and were martyred.

It is important to remember that First Peter, like other late New Testament writings, reflects the expectation of Christ's early return and the end of history. The sense was, Don't contest authority because it won't be around long!

Marriage

The husband-and-wife dynamics are intriguing. Keep in mind the heavily patriarchal family life of the Near East. Read between the lines to see the spiritual revolution taking

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place. “Wives, . . . accept the authority of your husbands” (1 Peter 3:1). Why? “So that, even if some of them do not obey the word, they may be won over [to Christ] without a word by their wives’ conduct.”

Husbands, who had nearly life-and-death power over their families, are urged to “show consideration for your wives . . . , paying honor” (3:7). Why? Because “they too are also heirs of the gracious gift of life.” This teaching about consideration and honor was a considerable advance over the idea that wives were property.

Suffering

Throughout the Bible we have studied and discussed suffering. Joseph suffered in an Egyptian prison, but God used it for good. The Israelites suffered in the wilderness, but God disciplined and tempered them. David suffered spiritual pain for his sins of passion. Israel suffered shame and destruction because of their sins. Job experienced unrelieved tragedy and suffering that had no apparent meaning, except that God cared for him. God had reasons that were not revealed to Job.

Jesus Christ suffered and died in total obedience to God. We, through the eyes of faith, see in that cross the saving, sacrificial work of God. Paul suffered shipwreck and beatings, sharing in the sufferings of Christ. Paul’s thorn in the flesh was not removed; God’s grace was sufficient to sustain him. Paul wrote, “We also boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us” (Romans 5:3-5).

Now in First Peter, we explore new dimensions of suffering. Christians are to avoid suffering that comes from evil. “Let none of you suffer as a murderer, a thief, a criminal, or even as a mischief maker” (1 Peter 4:15). Yet suffering may come to the Christian in spite of exemplary behavior. Suffering may come precisely because a person is a Christian, a member of the body of Christ.

If you are reviled, you are blessed. Why? “Because the spirit of glory, which is the Spirit of God, is resting on you” (4:14). “It is better to suffer for doing good, if suffering should be God’s will, than to suffer for doing evil” (3:17). “If you endure when you do right and suffer for it, you have God’s approval” (2:20).

“Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example” (2:21). Now the language is steeped in Isaiah 53: “When he was abused, he did not return abuse. . . . by his wounds you have been healed” (1 Peter 2:23-24). Remember too not only the sufferings of Christ but the sufferings of other Christians. Be “steadfast in your faith, for you know that your brothers and sisters in all the world are undergoing the same kinds of suffering” (5:9). God will “restore, support, strengthen, and establish you” (5:10).

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The Second Coming

Some people were giving up. They had been promised in the preaching that Christ would come soon, very soon. Some abandoned the faith; some stayed in the church reveling in their newfound freedom; some became bitter and cynical (2 Peter 2).

Remember, Peter says to the scoffers, that God is trying to save others. Remember too that “with the Lord one day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like one day” (3:8). The day of the Lord will come; but it will come as Jesus said, like a thief (3:10). New heavens and a new earth are promised. Therefore, believers were urged to continue to be a set-apart, holy people. “Strive to be found by him at peace, without spot or blemish” (3:14).

MARKS OF DISCIPLESHIP

“Holy people” have an “inner” mark of character and an “outer” mark of compassion. Some things are a no-saying: drunkenness, adultery, lying, and the like. Some things are a yes-saying: witnessing, practicing hospitality, striving for peace and justice, caring for the broken and the hard-pressed. Holiness, of an arrogant form, usually emphasizes a few “no” rules, ignores others, and entirely forgets sacrificial ministry in the world. When Mother Teresa of India said about her care for the dying, “I do it for Jesus’ sake,” she caught the spirit of First and Second Peter.

The disciple may wear the same kind of clothes others are wearing, speak the same language, live in the same city; but the disciple is different and knows this must be. Called out of worldly pursuits and careless living, the disciple, like Abraham, is summoned to be a part of a “set-apart” people, blessed to be a blessing.

Think about your own life and write a paragraph telling how Christ has helped you be “set apart” and yet how much you have to grow to really be a part of the “royal priesthood.”

Write a second paragraph with your congregation in mind. Without being personal or judgmental, what would need to happen for your Christian community to see itself as “a

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Disciples know themselves as distinctive, peculiar people bearing the inner mark of character and the outer mark of compassion.

chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people"?

Recall times you have suffered because you did what was right or because you did something in obedience to your faith in Jesus Christ.

IF YOU WANT TO KNOW MORE

Study the words and phrases in Isaiah 52:13–53:12 and 55:1–56:8 and list as many as you can that have special meaning for “set-apart” people today. Add your interpretations as you prepare your list.

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