

THE DELIBERATE LIFE A SERMON ON I PETER 1:13-2:3 by Rev. Russell B. Smith

On an ordinary day in September of 2002, Derek and Alex King were convicted of murder. You may remember [their story](#): they bludgeoned their father to death with a baseball bat, and then shortly thereafter confessed to the crime. They had run away 10 days prior to the killing and stayed with family friend Ricky Chavis. This friend allowed them to stay up late, play video games, smoke marijuana, do whatever they wanted – Chavis also molested at least one of the boys. But what caught national attention was the age of the boys — they were 12 and 13 years old.

In all its shocking detail, this case illustrates a painful truth – the consequences for a lack of self-control. I can't speak for these boys' psychological or emotional state, but it certainly appears that when they ran away, they chose the path of least resistance: self-indulgence. It is likely that if we were to look at their lives with scrutiny, we would see that habit firmly engrained in their behavior – hedonism. In the end, they indulged themselves to such a degree that they committed a horrible crime that carries with it severe consequences.

The Apostle Peter, in talking to us as strangers in a strange land, charges us to be holy. A significant part of being holy, in his framework, deals with self-control. We are called to be refreshingly different in this world filled with sadness. Every day we hear stories like that of the King brothers – perhaps they are not as graphic or intense, but they are sad nonetheless. Those who follow the lead of our culture have chosen self-indulgence over self-control and pay a terrible price. Christ, rather, calls us to holiness through self-control, and as we look at today's passage, we see that Peter reminds us of our grounds for holiness. He then tells us how to exercise our self-control in what we avoid and what we engage in. That having been said, let's dig into the text.

Therefore, prepare your minds for action; be self-controlled; set your hope fully on the grace to be given you when Jesus Christ is revealed. As obedient children, do not conform to the evil desires you had when you lived in ignorance. But just as he who called you is holy, so be holy in all you do; for it is written: "Be holy, because I am holy."

Since you call on a Father who judges each man's work impartially, live your lives as strangers here in reverent fear. For you know that it was not with perishable things such as silver or gold that you were redeemed from the empty way of life handed down to you from your forefathers, but with the precious blood of Christ, a lamb without blemish or defect. He was chosen before the creation of the world, but was revealed in these last times for your sake. Through him you believe in God, who

raised him from the dead and glorified him, and so your faith and hope are in God.

Now that you have purified yourselves by obeying the truth so that you have sincere love for your brothers, love one another deeply, from the heart. For you have been born again, not of perishable seed, but of imperishable, through the living and enduring word of God. For,

"All men are like grass, and all their glory is like the flowers of the field; the grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of the Lord stands forever."

And this is the word that was preached to you.

Therefore, rid yourselves of all malice and all deceit, hypocrisy, envy, and slander of every kind. Like newborn babies, crave pure spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow up in your salvation, now that you have tasted that the Lord is good.

First, Peter reminds us of our grounds for holiness. Last week, Peter established our identity as being a chosen people of God. Holiness is a way of conveying that chosenness – it means to be set apart for a special purpose. In OT times, ceremonial holiness was maintained through ritual. The book of Leviticus details the different sacrifices to take away ceremonial uncleanness and signify the forgiveness that comes by faith in God. This past week, our Jewish friends celebrated the Jewish New Year, and then next week, they'll celebrate the Day of Atonement. Leviticus 16 outlines the original institution of the Day of Atonement. The high priest would first offer a sacrifice for his family, then a sacrifice on behalf of the whole congregation of Israel, and then a sacrifice to make sure the altar and tent were holy. Finally, the priest lays hands on the head of a live goat and confesses sin. This goat, called a scapegoat, is released into the desert to die, symbolically taking sin away from the congregation.

That's how the idea of holiness was developed in Old Testament times. We have in our sight Christ, who was the perfect sacrifice for all God's saints. Verses 18-21 show us that Christ's blood is our sacrifice. Christ lived a perfect life – he was the only truly innocent person who walked on earth. Christ – who was executed for a crime he didn't commit. Christ – who rose again from the dead and ascended to heaven. It is through Christ alone that all God's people stand forgiven before a holy God. Remember then, that our holiness is not established through what we do – it isn't established through ritual. It isn't even established through our self-control. It is guaranteed through faith in Christ.

The results of this holiness, however, are that God will transform us from within. God will, through the power of the Holy Spirit, make us more like Jesus. And a key component is the virtue of self-control. Self-control is not about a lack of pleasure. That is the caricature that people have about Christians – that we are a bunch of killjoys. I had an English teacher one time who described a Presbyterian as a person who was afraid that someone somewhere was having

fun. That's a gross misunderstanding of the biblical picture of self-control. Self-control is simply restraining your impulses so you can enjoy what's best. It is about reigning in our impulses and orienting our minds, hearts, and actions in the right way. This is a concept as old as Aristotle, who described ethics as "behavior appropriate to a situation." Shakespeare understood this kind of self-control. In Hamlet, he has the passionate Hamlet say to the very self-controlled Horatio, "Give me that man that is not passion's slave, and I will wear him in my heart's core, ay, in my heart of heart, as I do thee." Self-control isn't about slavery, but about being free from the impulses that lead us away from the best things in life. Paul conveys this concept in Galatians. In 5:1 he says that we are free, but in 5:22, he lists out the fruit of the Spirit – the results of our freedom. And self-control is on that list.

Peter shows us that self-control first is a matter of restraining negative impulses. This passage certainly touches on that theme. Verse 14. "...do not conform to the evil desires you had when you lived in ignorance."; verse 18 "you were redeemed from the empty way of life handed down to you from your forefathers." 2:1 "rid yourselves of all malice and all deceit, hypocrisy, envy, and slander of every kind."

It is significant that the only specific impulses that Peter talks about here are a cluster of evils that could be clustered under the heading of anger "malice, deceit, hypocrisy, envy, slander." This is not to say that these are the only evil impulses we will encounter, but it is clear that Peter saw them as a clear danger to those who are living as strangers in a strange land. Many of us work in places filled with anger, malice, cattiness, and deceit. The wildfire of malicious and destructive gossip runs rampant through many workplaces. Many of us have been the recipients of someone venting their anger upon us. And we've seen this anger get inside of us. How many of us have felt that quick fire within that caused us to fire off words we later regretted? How many of us have felt that slow burn that gradually poisoned a relationship? How often have we spent more time being angry about someone else's faults than being aware of our own? Peter says to put all that away from us. Put it away because it is a distraction from the positive work to which Christ calls us.

Peter lays out some of these positives quite clearly in this passage.

- Verse 13 – prepare your minds for action
- Verse 22 – have sincere love for one another, from the heart
- Verse 2 – crave pure spiritual milk

The positive things that we're called to in contrast to the inheritance of anger and selfishness are love of one another and craving pure spiritual milk – which comes through the Holy Spirit working through the word of God.

Love is worked out in actions and deeds. Just as we have to be self-controlled in avoiding anger, we have to be self-controlled in dispensing love. Gardeners, what happens to a garden if you are not disciplined in watering, weeding, fertilizing, mulching, and all the other activities that help you control your garden? It becomes a jungle – some desirable plants die and less desirable plants creep in. What happens to your health if you're not disciplined in diet and exercise? It declines. In the same way, we have to be disciplined and intentional about showing love to one another.

You've seen the bumper sticker "Practice Random Acts of Kindness and Senseless Deeds of Beauty." I love the sentiment. Our calling as Christians is to take it to the next level – practice deliberate acts of kindness and purposeful deeds of beauty. Our friends at the Vineyard Fellowship regularly give away soda cans as an expression of God's love. People come up and say, "This is a random act of kindness, right?" – to which Randy Bohlender, the pastor of evangelism replies, "There's nothing random about this. Who just happens to be at a street corner with a cooler full of sodas and cards that say "God loves you"? This is no accident."

That's why we've started doing Service Saturdays – We're called to be disciplined in our love for each other and for other people. I would love to see the day that we come together one Saturday a month and have a brief time of worship – and then we would disperse all over the city, one group working Habitat for Humanity, one group serving meals at the Gospel mission, another group visiting the elderly, and so on – tangibly spreading the love of Christ in an intentional deliberate way.

But this passage isn't about a church program of loving one another – it is about a lifestyle of love. It is about getting up each day, looking at it as an adventure filled with opportunities to express love in your daily pursuits. Every encounter is an opportunity to tangibly express the love of Christ – from simply offering a kind word to a store worker to surprising your co-workers (or pastor) with some small kindness (like Krispy Kreme ? donuts).

So after reminding us of our grounds for holiness, Peter shows us what to avoid when exercising our self-control and what to engage in. Tammy and I recently rented *A Beautiful Mind*. It's a wonderful film based on a true story of a brilliant mathematician who studied at Princeton. He developed a breakthrough concept that revolutionized economics, and won a prestigious position at a Washington think tank and a teaching position at MIT. But he also suffered from schizophrenia. He suffered delusions, seeing people who didn't really exist. Gradually, he sunk into a world of paranoia and delusion.

The astounding thing about the story is that he eventually triumphs. With the help of his wife and a psychologist, the main character comes to realize that

these people he sees, though they seem real, are products of his mind. Like anyone dealing with a battle of the mind, he begins with awareness. And then, over many years, he learns to shut out the people he's imagining. He exerts self-control over his mind. He still sees the people. They are still in his realm of perception – but he learns the self-control to ignore them and not feed the demons. Once he has learned the self-control to restrain the negatives, he is able to return again to a compelling positive – teaching mathematics at Princeton, enjoying relationship with his wife, and eventually, winning the Nobel Prize for his past work in economics.

It all begins in the battlefield of the mind. Paul in Romans 12:2 says to be transformed by the renewing of your mind. The challenge for us is to choose whether we will continue to indulge our every impulse, as our culture urges us to do, or whether we will begin the slow, daily process of self-control. You think about that. Amen.