

Following in Holiness

Welcome back to Walking with Purpose! Last week we were challenged to not just ***read*** our Bibles, but to ***study*** them! That's how God will speak to and disciple us, teaching us how to live! We saw in Mark 4 that the life producing a bountiful crop not only "heard" the Word, but "accepted" it. Those who want to be conformed into the image of God must allow the Word to do its work through obedience.

Time with God is the best way to fortify our lives against sin. The Great Wall of China is a gigantic structure that cost an immense amount of money and labor. When it was finished, it appeared impregnable. But *three times* the enemy breached it-- not by breaking it down or going around it. They did it by *bribing the gatekeepers*. Dr. Harry Emerson Fosdick said: "It was the human element that failed. What collapsed was *character*...which proved insufficient to make the great structure really work."



Fellowship

1. How did you feel stronger this past week after studying God's Word?
2. What areas of weakness in your "walls" did God point out?



Discipleship

Imagine that you work for a company whose president found it necessary to spend an extended period of time abroad. So he says to you and the other trusted employees, "Look, I'm going to leave. And while I'm gone, I want you to pay close attention to the business. You manage things while I'm away, but I will write you regularly. When I do, I will instruct you in what you should do from now until I return from this trip." Everyone agrees. He leaves and the trip takes longer than anyone had anticipated! He's gone for a couple of years, but during that time he writes often, communicating his

desires and concerns. Finally he returns. He walks up to the front door of the company and immediately discovers *everything* is a mess--weeds flourishing in the flower beds, windows broken across the front of the building, the dozing secretary at the front desk, loud music blaring from several offices, two or three people lounging in the back room. Instead of making a profit, the business has suffered a great loss.

Without hesitation he calls everyone together and with a frown asks, "What happened? Didn't you get my letters?" You say, "Oh, yeah, sure. We got all your letters. We've even bound them in a book. And some of us have memorized them. In fact, we have 'letter study' every Sunday. You know, those were *really great letters*."

The president then asks, "But what did you *do* about my instructions?" And, no doubt, the employees would respond, "*Do?* Well, nothing. But we *read* every one!"

You see, it's a whole lot easier to just *read* the Bible than to *do* what it says. But *obedience* is the only path to *holiness*. God has called us to Himself...to come away, be separate, and follow Him. The word "holy" is defined as "set apart." So by definition, only those *pursuing* holiness are really Christ's disciples!

Turn with me to James 1, verses 21-27 as we read it together. "Therefore, get rid of all moral filth and the evil that is so prevalent and humbly accept the word planted in you, which can save you. Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says. Anyone who listens to the word but does not do what it says is like a man who looks at his face in a mirror and, after looking at himself, goes away and immediately forgets what he looks like. But the man who looks intently into the perfect law that gives freedom, and continues to do this, not forgetting what he has heard, but doing it – he will be blessed in what he does. If anyone considers himself religious and yet does not keep a tight rein on his tongue, he deceives himself and his religion is worthless. Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world."

"To keep oneself from being polluted by the world". It's so easy to say, yet so hard to do! Yet, that's *holiness in a nutshell!*

In our culture, it's become "normal" for Christians to live unholy lives: to cheat on their taxes; to lie about being sick when they would rather not work; to speed on the highway, gossip about a boss, complain about their spouses, and refuse to confront sin. In fact,

91% of people confess that they *regularly* lie.

79% give out false phone numbers or invent new identities when meeting strangers on airplanes.

20% said they couldn't get through *even one day* without going along with a *previously manufactured* lie.

Now, what I found most intriguing about the study, was that people no longer seem to care. We accept it. It doesn't bother us. We don't get upset anymore when someone exaggerates, falsifies, fabricates, or misrepresents the truth. We live in a day when we've been bombarded with erased tapes, tampered evidence, illicit cover-ups, padded resumes, and exaggerated ads...to the point that we've pretty much *given up* on holiness

The study found that in the past, people thought lying was wrong. Now, almost half of all those surveyed say it isn't.

But God has a different standard! Leviticus 11:44 says, "I am the Lord your God; consecrate yourselves and be holy, because I am holy." Some people wrongly assert that "the God of the Old Testament" is one of wrath and judgment...while they label "the God of the New Testament" as one of mercy and love. Yet God's character is constant; His holiness will never change; He's the same yesterday, today and forever. Just as God has established the universe to operate on physical laws, there are both *unchangeable* moral and spiritual laws. If we ignore them, we have chaos.

Alan Shepherd, the very first American astronaut in space, was asked by a reporter just before he got into the capsule: "What is the *one thing* you're depending on most in this space venture?" His answer was classic, "I'm depending on the fact that God's laws never change." What if the rotation of the earth was inconsistent? What if gravity reversed every other day? Yet the reason we can study science is because it's predictable, just like God's character.

A cartoon showed two couples seated in a living room, engaged in Bible study. One of the women is speaking. "Well," she says, "I haven't actually *died* to sin, but I did feel kind of faint once." How about you? Have you labeled any area of your life as "off-limits" to God? Or have you given Him free reign to be your Lord and Master...no matter how badly his pruning shears hurt?

One day I felt a suspicious "bump" as I pulled my car into the driveway and came to a stop. Sure enough, one of the rear tires was flat, exposing the metal cord of the steel-belted radial. The next morning, when I visited the tire dealer, I noticed that the same brand of tire on the other side of the car showed no such wear. My friend explained that a nail had stuck in the rubber and transferred rust to the steel belts, weakening the interior of the tire. That, in turn, caused the belt and the tread to separate. Just a nail and a little rust!

How easily spiritual "bumps" can develop in the life of a Christian! Unconfessed sin in the heart is like rust on the steel belts. At first, nothing appears to be wrong, and we may not even feel any consequences. Yet the damage is insidious: our love for the Lord wanes; interest in God's Word declines; prayer becomes less important...and soon spiritual progress comes to a bumping halt.

At the beginning of the journey, like good little sheep, we may say to Jesus, "I'll follow you wherever you go!" But then Jesus says to our youth, "I want you to go the honest way - don't cheat. Take the high road - don't have pre-marital sex." He says to adults, "I want you to take the faithful way - bring your children up in the nurture of the Lord. Love as I have loved you. Look out for the interests of others." And we say, "Are you sure Lord? That's kind of hard." Then things get even **more** difficult. Jesus says to spouses, "Turn the other cheek. Submit to one another. Give without expecting anything in return." He says to kids, "Honor your parents. Do everything without complaining." And again, we say, "Are you sure, Lord?"

The true sign of a sheep is one who is willing to follow - even through the valley of the shadow of death. Now, don't be insulted -- but sheep are so trusting (and so dumb!) that they don't really *think* about where they're going! They're just so enamored with their Shepherd's voice that they're willing to follow him ANYWHERE! Yet when they do, there is safety.

Have you ever fallen into the trap of challenging God's laws...and then blaming Him when things went badly?

Sammy was a young boy whose summer days were filled with times of walking through the woods, playing with friends, and fishing in the pond down the road. Fishing was by far his favorite thing to do. Just about every day during his summer vacation, he would dig up some worms and head off, pole in hand.

This steamy hot day was like most others during Sammy's summer break. Waking early, he grabbed his pitchfork and worm pail and walked into the woods to search for bait. Under one old stump he hit the jackpot and in 2 minutes he had all the bait he needed.

Reaching into his bait bucket, Sammy pulled out a big worm. He noticed a stinging in his hand...but filled with the excitement of the moment, he paid no attention. Within 30 seconds, Sammy had a strike and pulled in a nice catfish. "Wow", he thought, "a fish in the first minute!"

He put the catch on his stringer, hurried to re-bait his hook and tried his luck again. Once again he felt a stinging sensation in his hand as he threw his hook into the pond. He didn't have time to worry about it. Within just a few seconds, he had another huge fish. He fumbled the next time he baited his hook--his hand felt numb and stiff. But Sammy was too excited about catching another fish to give it much thought.

At the end of only an hour, Sammy had caught 8 large fish! This was definitely his best fishing day ever. He was so proud of his accomplishment that, even though he had plenty of time left, he threw the heavy stringer of fish over his shoulder and dashed down the road toward home to show off his catch.

The local sheriff happened to drive up alongside Sammy and started to congratulate him on his catch of fish. With a smile and a victory whoop, Sammy held up the stringer. The sheriff gasped, parked his car and ran over to Sammy. His eyes hadn't deceived him--Sammy's arms really were red and swollen to about twice their normal size. "Exactly where have you been and what bait did you use to catch all those fish?" the sheriff asked Sammy.

"I found some special bait under an old stump," Sammy boasted. "The worms really wiggle good," he said, handing up the bucket for inspection. After a close look at the worms, the sheriff went into fast-forward. Putting the bucket in the car, he swooped up Sammy made a U-turn on the dirt road and sped off to the hospital, but Sammy was already dead.

What the sheriff had discovered was that Sammy had been fishing with baby rattlesnakes. Sammy's deadly bait brought him a good morning of fishing...but cost him his life. Had Sammy stopped fishing after that first sting, he could have been saved. But Sammy was having too much fun and didn't bother himself with the small voice of pain in his hand. Then, as the hand grew numb, even that voice was silenced.

Playing around with and not dealing with sin is like using baby rattlesnakes for bait. It may seem harmless, but all the while its venom is having serious ramifications.

Sin will always take you further than you want to go, will keep you longer than you want to stay, and will cost you more than you want to pay! Developing our relationship with our Shepherd, listening to and **obeying** His voice will safeguard against the deception of sin. It will sensitize us to the first twinges of conviction and save us from untold future pain and regret.



Ministry

3. As you endeavor to live a holy life, how do you feel separated and estranged from the world?

Read John 15:18-21. What comfort do these verses give?

4. Read I Peter 2:9-11. How is a royal heir called to a higher standard?

5. Memorize Romans 12:9 together.

What *one change* will obedience to this verse require of you this week?

6. Re-read James 1:22-27. Focusing on verse 22, what are you challenged to take from your “head” to your “heart”?

What are 2 things you can do this week to keep yourself from being “polluted” by the world? (verse 27)

7. Read James 4:4-5. What choice does verse 4 require us to make?



Evangelism

8. Talk about the phrase, “Be *in* the world but not *of* the world.”

What is the key to obeying Matthew 28:19 and James 4:4 simultaneously?



Worship

9. This is a great time to share the stories of what God has saved you from! How did Christ draw you to Himself?

How does He continue to lead, guide and save you?

10. Spend some time praising Him and committing to *immediate obedience*.