



## KEY EVIDENCES OF BEING BORN AGAIN

I Peter 1:13-25

Pastor Al Detter

9:30 & 11:00am Grace Church March 19, 2006

READ I PETER 1:13-25. George Barna is perhaps the best-known pollster concerning Christianity in America. According to his 2005 findings, 80% of Americans call themselves Christians. Sixty-eight percent call themselves “committed Christians”. Forty percent claim to be “born again” Christians. That’s about 88 million people. (Only seven percent claim to be evangelical.)

Only God knows the heart of a person. But when I see numbers like that, I wonder why America isn’t a different place. I wonder why we’re on a moral slide downward. I wonder why the church isn’t having a greater impact. There can only be two reasons for this. Either not everyone who claims to be born again is or some who are born again are struggling to obey God.

Jesus said in Matthew 7:21, “Not everyone who says to Me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of the Father who is in heaven.” The Apostle James said, “What use is it, my brethren, if a person says he has faith, but he has no works? Can that faith save him? (3:14ff.)” You see, the Bible says that people can claim to be a Christian, claim to be born again and still be lost.

Last week, I said that being born again is about experiencing a second birth. We’ve all been born the first time. We’ve all had a physical birth or we wouldn’t be here. Peter is telling us that we need a second birth, a spiritual birth, to enter heaven. We can’t get into heaven by virtue of our first birth.

Now if you’ve ever done international traveling, you know that you need a passport. When you apply, you just can’t show up and say, “If you can see me, that’s proof enough that I’ve been born and that I’m me. Give me my passport.” You have to produce two compelling proofs that you’ve been born and that you’re who you say you are.

The same is true about our spiritual birth. We can’t just claim that we’ve been born again. There needs to be some compelling proofs that we’ve had a spiritual birth. That’s where Peter heads in the second half of chapter 1. He connects the first half of the chapter to the second half of the chapter with the word “therefore” in verse 13. If a person is truly born again—the first half of I Peter 1, “therefore” certain things will be true about the person—the second half of I Peter 1.

So how can a person tell if he or she is truly born again? Peter mentions two compelling evidences or proofs that a person has been born again. In my opinion, these are the very top two in the entire New Testament. If these things are true in your life, you can be certain that you have a passport to heaven. If they’re significantly absent from your life, you need to do some serious self-examination. Here’s the first evidence a person has been truly born again.

### **Born Again Evidence #1—Holiness (vss. 13-21).**

When a person is born again, the moral nature of God is placed within us. The Apostle John calls it the “seed” of God (I Jn. 3:9). This seed within a born again person causes him or her to have an aversion to sin and a desire to conform to the character of God. It causes a behavioral change. Born again people begin to behave in ways that more and more reflect the nature of God.

This is a good time to define “holy” and “holiness”. The meaning of “holy” is used in a variety of ways in the Bible. But I want to get to the heart of what Peter is talking about when he uses the term here. He’s using “holy” in its ethical or moral sense. In this sense, true holiness is the absence of sin and evil in a person’s life and it’s the presence of Godlike qualities.

Obviously, only God is moral perfection. There’s not a shadow of evil in Him and He stands above everything in His righteousness. When we become born again, He wants to replicate His life in us. He wants us to be as closely conformed to His character as possible. He doesn’t want sinful behavior to compromise our character and our relationship with Him.

But holiness is not automatic. There’s a sense in which we must cooperate with God in us. In verses 13-15, Peter tells us what we must do to realize changed behavior.

**1. We must make up our minds that holiness is what we’ll pursue (vs. 13a).** The battle for holiness begins with the mind. We’ve got to agree with God in our minds that godly behavior is right and we must make decisions with our minds that will make that happen.

The word “gird” is used for what we need to do with our minds. In those days, people wore long and flowing robes. If they wanted to run or do some vigorous work, they needed to take a rope and tie up the loose ends in such a fashion that they wouldn’t trip or hinder their work.

Holiness begins by tying up the loose ends of our minds. There’s too much sloppy thinking going on. We read God’s Word and say, “My case is an exception. That doesn’t apply to me.” Or we entertain ourselves with content that’s patently unchristian and say, “That’s the world we live in. It won’t hurt me. Or it’s an art form.” Or we say, “Others are doing it. I can do it too.” This is all loose-robe thinking. It will trip us up. We’re to take all the lies and excuses we have for compromising our behavior and tie them to the Word of God. And we need to take action that will result in moral excellence.

So when we gird our minds, we think biblically with a view towards proper action. The action we take will put into practice what the Bible asks us to do. Being holy starts with a decision to train our minds to be holy.

Here’s the second thing we must do to cooperate with God in the matter of holiness:

**2. We must be under proper control (vs. 13b).** The word in Greek is literally “be sober.” It’s not a word that means to be solemn or serious. It’s a word that means “not intoxicated”. When you’re drunk, you’re not under proper control. Peter isn’t just talking about not getting drunk physically. He’s talking about not letting your mind come under the wrong influences that can control you and lead you to wrong behavior.

We’re to come under the control of the Holy Spirit and the Word of God. We’re to get with people who will influence us to do what’s right. Don’t allow any influences upon you that will pull you in the wrong direction. Unholy behavior means that we’ve lost our spiritual sobriety.

There’s a third thing we must do to become holy:

**3. We must focus on the return of Christ (vs. 13c).** One of the focus points in the early church was their avid expectation that Christ was about to return. But as time wore on, that topic began to fade. The church began to feel more like permanent residents than like strangers on this earth. When that happens, Christians become more earthlike. They think and live more like the world around them. Peter attempts to remind his readers to make the return of Christ central in their thoughts again.

I think the American church is deficient in this area. We’re not thinking that much about the return of Christ for His church. Think about it! Jesus is engaged to the church but the bride has forgotten about the wedding day! We’ve become too comfortable on this earth and we live like this is our permanent home. It’s not! We need to start anticipating the Lord’s return—daily!

The Apostle John tells us what fixing our eyes on the hope of Christ's return will do for us. He says, "He who has this hope in him purifies himself, even as He is pure (1 Jn. 3:1-2)." Friends, when we live in the daily expectation that Jesus is coming again, it changes our behavior.

Here's a fourth thing we must do to become holy:

#### **4. We must conform to the character of God, not to the desires of our former lusts (vss. 14-15).**

Whether you know it or not, life becomes harder when you get born again. Born again people have two natures in them. When we get born again, we get a new nature, the nature of God. But the sin nature is not destroyed. It remains. We still have a pull back to the old ways. We didn't have this kind of battle before we got saved.

Here's the problem. The old nature wants its way. It wants gratification outside the boundaries of holiness. It wants to enjoy itself in ways that violate the character and commands of God. It's a very powerful force to deal with. I hate the magnetic pull of lusts!

What's more, verse 14 says that if you didn't have a Christian background, you didn't even know living for your lusts was wrong. If your body said you were hungry, you ate something. If your body said you wanted sex, you did something sexual. That's where lots of people are. Their passions control them and they don't know that God expects something different.

From time to time, newer unmarried couples at Grace come to see me. They've really had no church background. Before long, the conversation moves to matters of their sexual relationship. I share with them what God says about sexual purity before marriage and they say, "What? Are you kidding me? We had no idea." And we get into a real interesting discussion. What a thrill it is to see people find Christ and choose His ways.

You see, when you get born again, God says that there's a higher standard. There's a holy way. It's matching the way we think and behave with the character of God. So Peter tells us in verse 14, "Don't let your old appetites control you. Don't do what your inner sinful passions make you feel like doing. Rather, think how God is and behave that way (vs. 15)."

Well you might be wondering, "How far should we take this? Can I be mostly good and a little bad?" Notice what verse 15 says, "Be holy in all your behavior." God doesn't have partial holiness in mind, that we're good when we're at church and with church people but when we're away from church, we can live any way we want. When God called us to salvation and fellowship with Him, He had in mind total transformation—that we behave like Him wherever we are and under every circumstance, even when we're in the privacy of our homes or all by ourselves and no one would know the difference.

Peter doesn't say holiness is a nice idea or suggestion for those who are born again. He says in verse 14 that it's a command, "As obedient children, be holy." Those of us who are parents know that there are some important things for our kids to do and not to do. So we give them some commands. At first, kids are pretty compliant. But there comes a day when obeying mom and dad isn't so automatic. They want a reason and you can't just say, "Because I said so."

The same thing is true about the command to be holy in all our behavior. There's something in us that wants a few reasons. And Peter seems to understand that. In fact, he starts verse 16 with the word "because" and goes through verse 21 with nothing but reasons to be holy. So if you want a few reasons to be holy, listen to these three compelling reasons:

**Reason #1—God is holy (vs. 16).** Why are we to be holy in all our behavior? Verse 16 says, "Because God is holy." We live in a day in which people set their own moral standards. People decide what's right and wrong. What's more, they reject anyone else imposing their standards on them. Morality has become a personal preference. That's a lie from Satan.

There's only one ground for morality in the universe and we find it in our text today. God says He's the moral compass. He's the final reason things are either right or wrong. Morality is centered in the nature of God. What's right for God is right for creation and what's wrong for God is wrong for creation. God's holiness is the ultimate basis for morality.

Born again people are to be holy not because the church says so but because God is holy! We're to be a reflection of who He is. If we expect to be with Him forever, why would we ever be content with anything less than being like Him now?

Here's the second reason why we're to be holy:

### **Reason #2—God is an impartial Judge (vs. 17).**

Peter cautions Christians about taking God for granted. The temptation is to think that if we have a special relationship with God, we'll have special privileges with God, that He'll be more lenient with us than with unbelievers. But Peter tells us not to forget one important fact. God isn't just our Father, He's also our judge. He isn't going to wink at our sin because He's our Father. While we live on this earth, God is going to hold us accountable for what we do.

One of the problems in the church is that we've crossed the line of respect with God. He has become our buddy. He has become our familiar friend. That's all well and good as long as we don't forget that there needs to be a healthy fear of God as Judge. We've lost the fear of God. We've watered it down to reverential awe of God in worship. That's not the fear Peter has in mind in verse 17.

In order to understand what Peter is trying to tell us, we need to translate his words to our earthly families. As we grow up, we should be developing a friendship with our fathers. There should be a sense of intimacy. But our fathers can't just be our friends. They have a position of authority over us that should inspire fear. We know they love us but we also know they can hurt us. It's not that they injure us, but that they discipline us for our own good when necessary. When we disobey our fathers, we should feel the fear of what they will do.

I loved my father and he loved me. But Dad had a tool of discipline he bought from the barber in town. It was a razor strap. There were times my Dad used that strap on me when I stepped out of line. But I had a healthy fear of my father.

The same thing is true about God. We should not ignore or treat casually the power God has to bring pain into our lives in order to correct us (Heb 12). At the same time, we need to know that fear and love are not mutually exclusive with God. He loves us and our salvation is secure. But membership in God's family should never lead to the presumption that God will not deal harshly with us. We need a fear of God that makes us sensitive to temptation and avoiding anything that would displease Him because of the adverse consequences.

We're missing the fear of God in our churches today. Few people recognize that God's discipline is to be feared if we fail to take holiness seriously. We're far too cavalier about this. God is our Father but He's also our Judge. We're not going to get away with anything.

Here's the third reason why we're to be holy:

### **Reason #3—God owns us (vss. 18-21).**

Verse 18 says that we have been redeemed. What does that mean? Redemption means that a price is paid for freedom. We were slaves to sin and God paid a price to free us. And the price wasn't cheap. God didn't pay to free us with anything this world has to offer. He paid for our freedom with the precious blood of Jesus Christ (vs. 19).

We learn from the Apostle Paul that when God paid the price to free us from slavery to sin, He bought us. He took ownership of our lives and we no longer belong to ourselves (1 Cor. 6:19-20). Because God now owns us, we're to bring glory to God by how we behave with our bodies.

The amazing thing is this. Verse 20 says that purchasing our freedom wasn't a last minute thing on God's part. He didn't wait till humanity crashed and then in panic, do the best thing He knew to buy our freedom. Our redemption was planned before the world was ever created. He knew exactly what He would do in sending Christ at just the right time, having Him die, raising Him from the dead, and bringing Him back to heaven again so that we could be free from sin.

That can take us into interesting places like—if God knew that sin would ruin the race before He created them, why didn't He prevent it all from happening in the first place? We'll leave that discussion for another day.

Here's the point. If God bought us from slavery to sin and now owns us, why would we want to slap Him in the face by demeaning the purchase price of Christ's blood by acting like we've never been bought? Why would we want to return to the very kinds of things that God freed us from in the first place? So reason number three for holiness is that God paid a price to free us from sin and to purchase us for Himself. God now owns us and we need to live for Him.

Author and speaker Tony Campolo speaks about the problem of mixing manure and ice cream. The ice cream won't spoil the manure but the manure will certainly spoil the ice cream. Born again people are ice cream. God doesn't want the manure to spoil us. So the biggest thing on God's mind is our holiness, the elimination of the manure. His agenda is to take us from a broken and twisted life of sin to be a partaker of His divine nature. So God causes us to be born again and that's going to mean a transformation of the way we live life.

And that transformation, more than anything else, is proof that a person has been born again. If you can see a positive trend upwards in your behavior, you can rest assured that you're born again. But if there's no transformation going on in your life, if you're comfortable breaking God's commandments and living like the world lives, that better be a huge warning flag for you. You can't be sure you've been born again.

Peter now moves to the second major evidence that a person has been born again:

## **Born Again Evidence #2—Love for Other Christians (vss. 22-25).**

Peter gives much less time to this evidence than he does the one about holiness. And so will I. But that doesn't mean it's any less important.

In verse 22, Peter connects the ability to love fellow Christians with the purification of our souls, that is, with being born again. In verse 23, Peter says that being born again should produce love because we have the seed of God's eternal Word in us. So if we've been born again, the second evidence is a sincere love for other Christians—a love that's genuine and not hypocritical (vs. 22).

Peter is not the only one who tells us that love for each other is proof of our salvation. Jesus said in John 13:35, "By this will all people know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another." The Apostle John said, "The one who says he is in the light and hates his brother is in darkness (1 Jn. 2:9)." He says it another way in another place, "Everyone who loves is born of God (1 Jn. 4:7)." Again, in another place, "We know that we have passed out of death into life because we love the brethren (1 Jn. 3:14)." A truly born again person is going to have both the capacity and the desire to love other Christians.

But once again, we need to realize that it's not automatic. We must cooperate with God on this one as well. That's why there's a command to love the brethren with a special, strong, and warm feeling in verse 22. We still have a tendency to favor ourselves and not love people we consider difficult or different from us.

Marie and I have done some international traveling. One morning we were in a hotel lobby in New Zealand and we ran into a group of tourists. We overheard some of them chatting and we discovered they were from a certain town in the States that caught our attention. We struck up a conversation and sure enough, they knew some people we know. Out of all the group that was in the lobby, we felt drawn to them in a very special and endearing way. We should have at least that much feeling for fellow Christians.

Now let's be honest. This is hard even for born again people—to love every kind and stripe of Christian that we know. It's easy to love some Christians. We like their personalities. We have chemistry that clicks. They fit our profile. But what about people who don't look like us? What about personalities that clash with ours? What about people whose idiosyncrasies bug us? What about people who have offended us? What about familiar faces that we tend to pass by in the hallways?

And let's go beyond the church. What about Christians we know who live in our own home? They can be pretty hard to love sometimes. And what about Christians where we work or go to school? Listen, no matter where we are, if there's a fellow Christian near us, we're called upon to love that person with a sincere and warm love. Even when it's difficult (Matt. 5:43-48).

Well, how do we do that? The answer is given in verses 23-25. We get the power to love fellow Christians because the Word of God working in the life of a born again person produces love. The Word of God is a powerful and living force. It was active when we were born again and it's active in causing us to love others. We don't have that kind of love ourselves. We need the Word of God at work in our lives.

But think about it for a moment. Millions claim to be born again. Most of those millions don't have a regular and dynamic relationship with God's Word. The Bible sits on a coffee table and they might hear a sermon every other week. Is it any wonder why millions of people are having relational problems with Christians in their homes and churches? When the Word of God is implanted in the born again heart, Christians love each other.

Having said that, there are three trends among Christians that are disturbing. It's a lack of demonstrated love by those claiming to be born again. First is the divorce rate among Christians. It's not that far behind the statistics of the unchurched. If we're married, we need to find ways to love each other if we claim to be born again. It starts with the Word of God!

Second is the movement of Christians from church to church all across America. Something bothers somebody and before long, they're out the door to another church. That's foreign to the concept of Christian love in the New Testament. You don't desert brothers and sisters. We're called upon to love each other by working through our issues.

And third is the general unfriendliness in churches. People tend to hang out week by week with the same people. Few Christians make sincere efforts to show hospitality to people around them they don't know. And new people coming into churches find it very hard to connect. Christians need to be looking for people to show love to whenever they're near someone whether they know them or not.

I've been in lots of churches over the years. Very few show the love Peter is recommending. But in January, Derek and I went to visit a church in New Castle. It was a church with over 1000 people. Far and away, of all the churches I've ever visited, they were the one church who was the friendliest. Whenever you got next to someone, they showed a genuine interest in you. It was amazing. Derek and I thought, "That's they way Grace needs to be!"

Now I'm not going to give you an out here, but I need to say this. God doesn't expect us to love all Christians equally. My wife is a member of this church and I love her more than any other member in this church. I'm in a small group and I'm closer to the people in that group than I am to many other Christians. So we're not talking about equal love. We're talking about practicing a genuine spirit of love and acceptance for every Christian we come in contact with rather than avoidance.

So the second evidence that a person has been born again is love for fellow Christians. Wherein that is interrupted, they will seek to remedy the situation without delay. A person who can cut off relationships with other Christians has a reason to wonder whether or not he or she has really been born again.

## Conclusion

Church, when a person gets born again, there are two key evidences that support that reality. First, a born again person moves in a direction that evidences more and more holiness. And second, a born again person displays a sincere love for fellow Christians.

As I said, we must cooperate with the Spirit and Word of God for these two things to happen. But when they do, you can be certain that you're born again. So if you want assurance of your salvation, just ask these two questions—"Am I becoming more godly?" and "Are my relationships with other Christians doing well?" I guarantee you, if you're honest with yourself, you'll know.