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1 Peter 1:13, 20, 22–25, 2:1–3, **ESV**

 13 *Therefore, preparing your minds for action, and being sober-minded, set your hope fully on the grace that will be brought to you at the revelation of Jesus Christ.* **20** *He was foreknown before the foundation of the world but was made manifest in the last times for the sake of you.*
 22 *Having purified your souls by your obedience to the truth for a sincere brotherly love, love one another earnestly from a pure heart,* **23** *since you have been born again, not of perishable seed but of imperishable, through the living and abiding word of God;* **24** *for* "**All flesh is like grass and all its glory like the flower of grass. The grass withers, and the flower falls, but the word of the Lord remain forever**." *And this word is the good news that was preached to you.*
 2 *So put away all malice and all deceit and hypocrisy and envy and all slander.* **2** *Like newborn infants, long for the pure spiritual milk, that by it you may grow up into salvation—* **3** *if indeed you have tasted that the Lord is good.*

Romans 12:1–2, **ESV**

12 *I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship.* **2** *Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.*

A wall of boxes.

When I was a young guy in my early twenties, I worked as a computer

programmer in San Francisco. I worked for a company called EDS, Electronic Data

Systems, owned by Ross Perot, a billionaire in Texas who would later run for

President. EDS assigned me to Blue Cross/Blue Shield of California. I wrote code

for systems that performed actuary calculations; actuaries are those people who

decide how much of a risk a candidate for insurance would be – you know, the

folks who conclude that men under twenty-five who drive red sports cars are a

bad risk. I also wrote code for claims processing systems; in case you don't know

it, computer programs process your insurance claims, and only a very, very small

percentage of them are ever looked at by a human. When I was a programmer

working at this insurance company, my parents lived down in Los Angeles, and

they had insurance with Blue Cross/Blue Shield. At one point, my mother

received medical treatment for a serious illness. The problem was that the

insurance company kept denying her claims, saying that they were for something

that they didn't cover. My mother happened to complain about this to me one

night on the phone. When I realized that the office I was working in, up in San

Francisco, processed my mother's claims, I decided that I could probably figure

out why they weren't being paid. It was, of course, very much against the policies

of Blue Cross/Blue Shield and for EDS, the company that hired me out to Blue

Cross/Blue Shield, to use the system for personal reasons, but I decided that I was

more concerned about my mother's insurance claims than doing the right thing.

So, the next day at work, I decided to check things out. I waited until the end of

the day, and then just before leaving, I submitted a transaction to the computer system to print out on paper my mother's insurance claims, along with the results of the claims software's analysis of her claims. My plan was to figure out just why they were denied from the perspective of the software, because this would give me a very precise understanding of just what went wrong. Once I knew why the computer didn't like her claims, I would be able to give her advice on how her doctor's office should resubmit the claims in a way that the software would like. Sometimes it's as simple as an assistant surgeon be listed simply as a surgeon to get that doctor's fees paid, for instance. Or, any suggestion that a condition might be pre-existing might have to be removed, that sort of thing. But again, what I was doing was, well, very wrong. Still, I left that evening, having submitted the transaction, knowing that my mother's insurance claim printouts would be sitting on my desk in the morning. I will get back to this.

Our first quote is from First Peter. The first verse of this letter identities the author as the great Apostle Peter. Most scholars believe that it was written by someone who followed a school of thought that was based on Peter's teachings. The Greek of the letter is extremely literate, not something we would expect from a poor, uneducated fisherman from the Galilee. Also, some of the ideas in the letter represent theological developments that did not come about in the

Christian church until much later, after Peter would have died. Finally, the letter

shows a strong influence of Paul's letter to the Romans, and Romans did not

become widely read and talked about until long after Peter and Paul had both

died. By the way, the letter is written to the people who lived in Asia Minor,

which is now part of Turkey.

In the part of the letter we are looking at, the pseudo-Peter is offering

strong words of encouragement to readers who are facing persecution or

suffering in any way. The passage says something about being sober-minded, but

it has nothing to do with alcohol. The author is telling the reader to remain in

control and stay clear-headed. That's a key to being holy: we must be thoughtful

about how we live from day to day. The passage goes on to tell us that the

standard of conduct that Christians should follow is provided by God. The phrase

You shall be holy, for I am holy apparently comes from Leviticus 11:44, and holy is

the same word as sanctified in Greek. The noun form of this word means "saint".

So, we are being told to set ourselves apart for God, and to consecrate our lives to

God, and to strive to be as holy as God – which is, of course, the highest goal, one

that we can never fully achieve. But the bottom line is that believers are to not

take part in sinful behavior. After all, we have been saved, not through earthly

things like money, things that are very temporary and have no eternal value, but

through the suffering and death of Jesus himself. And, importantly, we should

remember that we have nothing to fear. *He was foreknown before the*

foundation of the world but was made manifest in the last times for the sake of

you ²¹ *who through him are believers in God, who raised him from the dead and*

gave him glory, so that your faith and hope are in God. We know that we are part

of a plan that existed before the world was created. The passage goes on to give

us some practical advice on just how to be holy: we must obey the truth that God

teaches and have a sincere love for other Christians. The passage ends with: *Like*

newborn infants, long for the pure spiritual milk, that by it you may grow up into

salvation— ³ *if indeed you have tasted that the Lord is good.* The reference to

infants and spiritual milk is there to tell us that when our faith is still raw, we need

to focus on the fundamentals of being holy, of being true Christians, before we

seek out more complex theological truths. So, we shouldn't get overwhelmed.

Stick to the basics. Follow what we have been taught by Jesus, take care of other

believers and support them in their faith, and focus on the basics.

Let's step back. What does it mean to be holy? Does it mean to be

perfect? That would mean that we achieved that goal of being just like God, and

we can never do that. Does it mean that we should always be praying, always

thinking about God? That would fit in with sticking to the basics, it would seem.

But it still seems impossible to achieve. We have to do the daily things of life, working, taking care of our families. Maybe it means that we should always be ready to admit our faults, to acknowledge it when we do evil, and then to seek forgiveness and regeneration, and to not repeat what we did wrong.

So, getting back to my mother's insurance claims: The next morning when I arrived at work, a few of the other programmers happened to be in the entryway of the building when I walked in. They chuckled and said hey, Buzz, that data you wanted printed it is waiting for you. I said thanks, wondering why they were so interested in my printout and what they were laughing at. But I figured it out when I got to my desk. You see, I had made a small programming mistake when I coded my transaction to printout my mother's insurance claims. It was a one character mistake. One keystroke. The result was that instead of printing out my mother's insurance claims, I submitted a transaction to printout the insurance claims of everyone who had insurance with Blue Cross/Blue Shield of California. This was, of course, millions of people. Perhaps you're old enough to remember the old printout paper that was extra wide, and had green and white stripes on it, and holes along both sides? Well, as it turned out, in the middle of the night, when the results of my little transaction were being printed, the computer operator realized something was wrong and stopped the printing. But still, when

I got to my desk, I found it surrounded by a tall wall of boxes, about thirty of

them, each filled with computer paper. My friends proceeded to applaud as I

worked my way around the wall of boxes and sat at my desk. Then my boss came

in and asked me to come to his office. I assumed that I was about to get into

trouble for trying to use the computer system of the insurance company for

personal reasons.

But that was not the case. My boss was simply upset about all the paper I

had wasted. The stuff was expensive. I needed to be more careful. He asked me

what the hell I was trying to do. I said that I was trying to print out my mother's

insurance claims to see why they weren't being paid. He said that the next time I

needed something paid, to just tell him and he would have someone rig the

system for me, that we had a special transaction that we could run that would

make any given claim get paid in full. He said that they used it for important

people, that they had once forced ex-President Ford's claims to get paid in full.

He added that we of course use it to get our own claims paid. I have to say that in

the four decades since this happened, society has become even more like my

boss. We're not held to a high moral standard by society. We are to help the

people we work for make a profit. We're to do what we have to do in life to take

care of ourselves. But when it comes to abstract things, like being holy, well, hell,

most people don't even believe in God anymore. It makes it all the harder to live

in the way Christ taught. How can we admit what we've done wrong, when

society hardly considers anything to be wrong?

This is why I like our second passage so much. *Do not be conformed to this*

world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may

discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect. It's from

Paul's letter to the Romans, a letter he wrote to a church he had not visited and

hoped to visit someday. Romans is often considered the finest explanation of

Christian theology ever written, and it has been extremely influential with people

like John Wesley, the founder of Methodism and Augustine of Hippo, the famous

theologian who lived around the year 400 A.D. In Chapter twelve, where our

passage comes from, Paul is transitioning from talking about theological issues to

discussing ethical issues. Our passage says that we should rise above the low

standards of the world and instead to try to understand just what God wants us

to do in our daily lives.

When I went back to my desk, a couple of the guys helped me carry the

boxes off to a dumpster. We did not recycle back then. We laughed the whole

time and I bought everyone a beer after work. The next day, it was completely

forgotten. I forgot about it too, until I was writing a sermon I gave recently. It

was about the ways that God speaks to us. I have to say that it took a couple of decades, but later, maybe when I was in my forties and had kids of my own, I remembered this incident. I remembered making a tiny programming error while doing something unethical. I realized at that moment that God had spoken to me. God had said, hey, you want some information, well here's a wall of boxes, chock full of information. By the way, I never did figure out what was wrong with my mother's insurance claims, but her doctor resubmitted them and they got paid.

Please pray with me. *God, the world is a demanding place when it comes to achieving. We must earn as much money as possible. We must own the latest high-tech gadgets. We must be powerful and influential. People must envy us. It's not enough to live comfortably. We must thrive in an entirely materialistic way. The one thing that society does not demand from us is to be holy, to live the way God wants us to live – because that might interfere with being successful. Help us to never forget that if we truly have faith, if we have answered the call of the Holy Spirit within us, if we have dedicated our lives to living the way Christ taught, then being holy will come naturally. We will not be perfect, but we will fail as infrequently as possible, admit our faults when we do fail, and we will then move forward with a renewed sense of faith and confidence. Most of all, let us remember that living in a holy way is also the best way to live happily. Amen.*