

Keys to Holy Living

by Bayless Conley

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Heavenly Father, we pray You would give us understanding. Lord, cause our hearts to understand and comprehend Your Word. It's our desire to not just be a hearer, but Lord, we're going to implement Your Word. We're going to be doers of the Word and not merely hearers. In everything, Jesus, we pray that You would be glorified, that Your name would be lifted high, amen.

First Peter 1:13 NKJV,

¹³ Therefore gird up the loins of your mind, be sober, and rest your hope fully upon the grace that is to be brought to you at the revelation of Jesus Christ.

When it talks about the revelation of Jesus Christ, it's just talking about His return, when Jesus comes again. When He does come again, our redemption will be complete, and it will be beyond anything that you or I have ever imagined. A grace that is so large and so vast that it cannot be calculated, will be brought to us at the revelation of Jesus Christ. It will become ours when Jesus is revealed. Paul wrote about this same day in 1 Corinthians 13:12 NLT, listen to it. He says,

¹² Now we see things imperfectly, like puzzling reflections in a mirror, but then we will see everything with perfect clarity. All that I know now is partial and incomplete, but then I will know everything completely, just as God now knows me completely.

The grace that we've already experienced in our lives will be swallowed up by an even greater grace when Jesus returns. Peace, joy, strength, comfort, and wholeness are all facets of God's grace. Beauty, harmony, contentment, creativity, holy awe, and wonder have all been partial and incomplete thus far, cloudy and obscure. But then, there will be absolute clarity without the limitations, constraints, or barriers that we experience in this world. But until that day comes and we experience the fullness of all that God has for us, what are we supposed to be doing? He tells us in the next couple of verses. First Peter 1:14–16 NKJV,

¹⁴ As obedient children, not conforming yourselves to the former lusts, as in your ignorance; ¹⁵ but as He who called you is holy, you also be holy in all your conduct, ¹⁶ because it is written, "Be holy, for I am holy."

Until that day comes when Christ returns, we are to live holy lives. It means set apart and consecrated to God. God says, "I'm holy. You be holy." As obedient children, children should act like their father. I was sitting at my kitchen table the other day, studying, and someone had given us a box of See's Candy as a gift. Janet is over, and she's actually reading the outside of the box. She goes, "Bayless, See's Candy has been around for 100 years." Of course, I responded, "Well, you better check it for mold." She just rolled her eyes and said, "You're becoming your father." That's exactly what my dad would have said. I said, "Well, it's true." In all the good ways, I'm becoming like my dad, and I recognize it more and more the older I get. Hopefully, I'm becoming more like my heavenly Father as I grow in grace and as I learn

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God's Word. He is holy. We are to be holy. Our belief and our behavior must run parallel. He said, "Don't be conformed to your former lust when you were ignorant."

In other words, don't continue to act the way you did before you were saved. The word conformed is interesting. It's a Greek word, *suschematizo* or *matizo*. It literally is the word we get schematic from in English. Don't live according to the world's pattern. Don't live according to the world's blueprint or its diagram. Don't be squeezed into the world's mold. Our values, priorities, attitudes, behavior, and speech should be vastly different from those of the world around us. Friend, if your values, priorities, speech, and actions are not different than the world, it's because you're not different. You need to get saved or you need to repent because you are terribly vacillated. There used to be a bumper sticker that I hated. I'm sure people meant well in putting it out, but it just said, "Christians aren't perfect, just forgiven." I used to hate that. To me, the message it sent was, "Hey, do you cheat on your income taxes? So do I, but I'm a Christian. I'm forgiven. Do you sleep around? I do too. Do you cheat on your wife? I cheat on my wife, but I'm forgiven. We're different. Is your mind filled with dirty thoughts? So is mine, but I'm forgiven. You can't be trusted? I can't be trusted either, but I'm forgiven."

Friend, we're not just forgiven. It's far more than that. We've been regenerated. We've been born again. We've received the life of God in our spirit. All things have passed away; behold, all things have become new to those who are in Christ Jesus. It's far more than just being forgiven. Before Janet and I met, I worked out at the local gym probably three or four times a week. Generally, if you stood still long enough, I witnessed to you. So, I shared Christ with almost everybody in the gym. I shared with this one guy, and there was a guy whom I hadn't met. I'm working on the machine, and he's doing the bench press next to me. This guy comes, and I'd witnessed. The guy came up and starts talking to the guy. This guy, doing the bench press, stops and starts sharing this really lewd story. He's being really loud about it. Just almost obnoxious. Everyone in the gym could hear him, and he was talking about how the night before, he was at Zelda's. It was a local club, and he had taken advantage of this drunk girl. He'd gotten her out into the parking lot in the backseat of his car and had sex with her in the backseat of the car. He's laughing, and everybody's listening to this thing about how he's taking this girl who had too much to drink. This is what happened, and they're laughing. The guy I witnessed to, suddenly realized I was standing there. He goes to the guy and says, "Shut up. This guy is a Christian." The guy who just got through telling the story said, "Well, I'm a Christian." I thought, "Bro, you're not helping the cause. Just shut up." Oh, there should be a difference between us.

In Exodus 11, God said, "I make a difference between my children and the Egyptians." There is a difference between the children of God and those who are in the world who have not received Christ. At least there should be. Here's the hard truth. Though our spirits have been born again, the sin nature still resides in our flesh. We're living in a fallen world that is constantly calling us, pushing us, enticing us, and pressuring us to go back to the way of the world rather than letting our new inward nature dominate us. The truth is, if you're not moving forward, if you're not pressing on as the apostle Paul said, you are sliding backwards. There is no such thing as being static in this Christian life. If you're not fighting the good fight, if you're not pressing forward, the world is pulling you backwards. So, why is it so monumentally important that our behavior lines up with our beliefs? Why must we allow the Holy Spirit to daily conform us into the image of Jesus as opposed to the spirit of the age conforming us to the way the world thinks, and the way the world acts, and the way the world talks? In fact, the Germans actually have a word for it. The spirit of the age, or the spirit of the modern culture, is called *zeitgeist*. Spirit of the modern time, and it is at work. *Zeit*=time, *geist*=spirit. It's the time spirit. There is a spirit of the modern culture that will press you, lure you, and try to push you into fitting in with the world. But there is another spirit. It's the *Heiliger Geist*, the Holy Spirit. If you're not yielding

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to the Heiliger Geist, friend, the zeitgeist will work in your life. It's going to be one or the other. It's going to be the spirit of the age, or it's going to be the Holy Spirit. Here, in these next few verses, he gives us some reasons why it's so important that we live these wholly separate, consecrated lives. I read on, 1 Peter 1:17–21 NKJV.

¹⁷ And if you call on the Father, who without partiality judges according to each one's work, conduct yourselves throughout the time of your stay here in fear; ¹⁸ knowing that you were not redeemed with corruptible things, like silver or gold, from your aimless conduct received by tradition from your fathers, ¹⁹ but with the precious blood of Christ, as of a lamb without blemish and without spot. ²⁰ He indeed was foreordained before the foundation of the world, but was manifest in these last times for you ²¹ who through Him believe in God, who raised Him from the dead and gave Him glory, so that your faith and hope are in God.

Now, he gives us two reasons here, and I want to take the second one first. The first reason why it's so important that our behavior and beliefs line up and that we live consecrated lives to God is because such a high price was paid for us. We weren't redeemed with silver and gold, but with the precious blood of Jesus. Just out of curiosity, the other day, I went online and was looking up expensive watches. I found this whole page of Rolex watches. A lot of the watches were \$50,000, \$60,000 for one watch. Some of them were \$100,000, \$130,000, \$150,000 for a single watch. A couple of them were \$250,000. One was \$560,000 for a single watch. They had one Rolex watch, and it was \$1.3 million for a single watch. Now, you wouldn't pay such a high price for a watch like that and then throw it in the mud, would you? No. What if you're going to your friend's house, you're knocking at the door, and they're not answering? Are you going to take your \$1.3 million watch off and start using it as a door knocker? No, you're not going to do that. Well, Jesus didn't shed His blood so we can continue to wallow in the sinful muck and mire of this world. A dear price was paid for you, friend. It makes the most expensive watch in the world look like trash compared to what He poured out. There is a second reason he gives in these verses. Because even though we're redeemed, we will be judged and rewarded for our works, lifestyles, and attitudes. Back to 1 Peter 1:17 NKJV. It says,

¹⁷ And if you call on the Father, who without partiality judges according to each one's work, conduct yourselves throughout the time of your stay here in fear.

The Scriptures actually talk a lot about it. This is not the Revelation 20 great white throne judgment, that's for unbelievers. Every believer, every one of us, will stand before the judgment seat of Christ and give an account for our lives, our motives, the things we busied ourselves with, and our speech. Jesus said we will give account for every word on the day of judgment, for the works that we did, and for why we did them. Paul wrote about it in 1 Corinthians 3, but I want to read to you his word from 2 Corinthians 5:8–10 TLB. He says,

⁸ And we are not afraid but are quite content to die, for then we will be at home with the Lord. ⁹ So our aim is to please him always in everything we do, whether we are here in this body or away from this body and with him in heaven. ¹⁰ For we must all stand before Christ to be judged and have our lives laid bare—before him. Each of us will receive whatever he deserves for the good or bad things he has done in his earthly body.

Now listen to that last verse, verse 10. This is from the Amplified. It brings out the full flavor of the original language. It says,

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¹⁰ For we must all appear and be revealed as we are before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may receive [his pay] according to what he has done in the body, whether good or evil [considering what his purpose and motive have been, and what he has achieved, been busy with, and given himself and his attention to accomplishing].

And from what Paul says elsewhere about it, 1 Timothy and 2 Timothy, it's going to be a public affair. It's not something where Jesus takes you aside and deals with you privately about it. It's a public affair. In 2 Timothy, Paul said, "Hey, henceforth there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will give me on that day. But not only me, but also to all those who have loved His appearing." We sang a little while ago, taking that thought from the book of Revelation, "I'll lay my crowns down at His feet." Well, you can't do that if you don't have any crowns. Crown represents authority. It represents reward because you serve the Lord with a pure heart down here, you fought the good fight of faith, you ran the race, and you kept the faith. Also, the book of Revelation says, "Let no man take your crown." How can someone else take my crown? How can they get my reward? The only way is if I'm hopelessly unfaithful and God has to get someone else to do the work that I was called and gifted to do. As much as I love you, my brother and my sister, I do not want to see you wearing my crown when I get to heaven. If we're allowed to lay them at His feet, I want to be able to do that myself. The Scripture says in Revelation that He is going to wipe away every tear from our eyes. I personally don't think that those are the tears we shed for the hardships in this earthly life. I think that when we stand before that judgment bar of Christ, some people are going to realize all they missed and the honor they could have given to their King. I think there are going to be some tears shed for that. I personally think those may be some of the tears that are wiped away. It's a great motivator. In fact, listen to the very next thing the Apostle Paul says in 2 Corinthians 5:11 TLB. He said,

¹¹ It is because of this solemn fear of the Lord, which is ever present in our minds, that we work so hard to win others.

So, Paul talks about the judgment seat of Christ, and then he talks about this fear of God that's ever present in his mind. He was always thinking about the judgment seat of Christ. I think we need to live with one eye on the judgment seat. For Paul, it's almost like he's a little nervous about it. If the Apostle Paul was nervous about standing before the judgment bar of Christ, it makes me doubly nervous. When I was in college, one of the professors put out a little want ad, and about 10 of us responded. Two of them were friends of mine. He had a farm not far from the university. So, he hired us for X amount of dollars a day. He had a dry riverbed that went through his farm. For our job—and he had a pickup truck. We would pick up river rocks and put them in the back of the pickup truck. Some of them weighed 30–40 pounds. We did that all day long. Just fill the pickup truck with rocks. They'd take them off. Whether he landscaped or dumped them, I don't know. Then, there were acres and acres of wild blueberries that we had to trim. It was tough work.

One of my buddies, we'll call him Lance. It was not his name, but we'll call him Lance. The very first day, Lance realized that this was going to be hard work. So, he kind of scouted things out, and he found a back road into the property. Well, on day two, Lance came, and everybody signed in. "Okay, we're all here today," and he's with the guys. But within about 20 minutes, he'd gone and found that road and had a friend come pick him up. He took off for the day, went drinking, and got high. Then, he'd come back 15 minutes before quitting time and joined the ranks of everybody as we came in and signed out. He did that the next day.

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He did it Tuesday. He did it Wednesday. He did it Thursday. He did it Friday. He never worked. He just went and got picked up on that back road. He didn't think anybody saw him. Next week, Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, and Friday, he didn't work at all. Then, we're going to get paid. I think it was for a couple of weeks' work. I remember we're all standing in a line in this professor's yard. He comes up to the first guy and says, "Hey, thanks. I've been watching you. You worked hard. I appreciate it. Here's your check. If I have another job, I'm going to call you. You were great." He said the same thing to the next guy. He thanked me for my hard work. He gave me my check, and then he came to Lance. He crossed his arms and said, "I've been watching you every day. I know what you've done." He said, "Get off of my property and never come back." I'll never forget the shame as he bowed his head, tucked his tail between his legs, and slinked off the property. He was expecting to get rewarded for something he'd never done.

My friend, we will stand before the judgment seat of Christ. We don't have forever. This life is brief. In fact, did you notice what he said? Listen to the language in the verse. He said that we need to conduct the time of our stay here in fear with a deep consciousness of God because we're going to be judged. So, we need to conduct the time of our stay here. The word stay means "pilgrimage." It literally refers to a short stay in a place that is not your home. James 4 says, "Our life is a vapor that appears for a little time and vanishes away." My dad died a few years ago, and he lived between our house and the church. So, virtually 3–4 times a week, when I would be going home, I would stop at my dad's house and harass him for a little while, just hang out with him and talk with him. For a solid year, I'd turn off and be going down my dad's street. I'd go, "He's gone." I just was in the habit, "Oh, I'm going to go see dad. I'd get in the car. I'd literally be driving by his house, and then it's like, "He's gone." Seven months later, mom, "She's gone." A lot of my friends are gone. A bunch of my cousins are gone. Not too long ago, my brother-in-law. One day, you're going to go, "Where is Pastor Bayless?" Gone. This is just a dressing room for eternity, my friend. Paul said that we need to look at the time of our sojourning here with a deep consciousness and a deep reverence for God. Then, there is a third reason that we're given. We should live these set-apart holy lives, and that's because the world is watching. The same thought of our stay here being so temporary is carried on into the second chapter. He says this in 1 Peter 2:11–12 NKJV.

¹¹ Beloved, I beg you as sojourners and pilgrims, abstain from fleshly lusts which war against the soul, ¹² having your conduct honorable among the Gentiles, that when they speak against you as evildoers, they may, by your good works which they observe, glorify God in the day of visitation.

The word observe means that "they look at it and weigh it out carefully. They watch your conduct and think deeply about it." The world is watching. Shortly after I got saved, I made a friend. He was a wonderful Christian. I thought he was really old. I think he was probably 42, but I was like 21. So to me, 42 is ancient. He worked a graveyard shift in a foundry. He loved the Lord. His wife and his teenage kids loved the Lord. His little brother was coming to visit him. His little brother was like 39. Little brother was not saved and not a Christian. I don't know why, but my friend told his little brother my story and shared with him that I was going through a bit of a rough patch. I was between jobs, and money was pretty tight. It really surprised me. His little brother gave me \$20. That may not seem like a lot now, but it was a lot then. Gasoline was 55 cents a gallon. My little 1963 microbus had a 10.5 gallon tank. I could fill up my tank for less than \$6. Twenty bucks would go a long way then. That night, we all went to hear this evangelist. His brother came along, and they all sat behind me. I was with some other folks.

So this guy, his wife, their kids, and his brother are sitting behind me. Offering time comes, and they're passing the bucket. I felt like the Holy Spirit whispered to me, "Put it all in." So, I took out

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my wallet, and I threw the \$20 in. After the service, this guy's brother comes up to me. He pulls me aside and said, "What did you do with the \$20 I gave you?" I said, "Why?" He said, "You put it in the bucket, didn't you?" I said, "What if I did?" He said, "I know you did. I saw you." I thought maybe I should have been a little more discreet, I guess. He said, "You believe this stuff, don't you? You're just like my brother. He always talks about God supplying his needs and that he trusts God. You believe the same way." I said, "Actually, yes, I do." Then, he surprised me. He said, "I want what you have. I want it. Will you pray with me?" I prayed with him and led him to the Lord. Now, I didn't know he was watching me. He told me later, "I gave you that \$20 because I knew they'd be taking an offering. I specifically gave it to you to watch and see what you'd do."

The world is watching. Maybe not necessarily like that, but your coworkers are watching you. Your neighbors are watching you. Our family and friends are watching us. When it really counts is during the hard times. They'll learn more about our faith during the hard times than they do when things are going in our favor. I just spoke at a church in Colorado recently. I've known the young pastor and his wife for a long time. They went through quite a few really hard years there, but they stayed faithful. I had the privilege to hang out with them and their family. They have kids ranging in age from like 17 down to 12. The kids were delightful. They were respectful. They were funny. They all loved Jesus. It's because they watched Mom and Daddy during the hard times. They saw a gospel and a faith that was real. There was no pretense about it. They saw the reality in their parents' lives, and they wanted to have the same thing in their lives. The Scripture says that the world is watching. They are observing how we live and what we do.

Now, how do we do it? How do we live holy, God-honoring, faith-displaying lives? Is it by gritting our teeth and throwing our will into overdrive? No, it's not by the power of our will alone. It's woefully insufficient. We didn't get saved that way. We're not called to live that way. In these verses we're looking at, he gives us two keys to tell us how it's done. The first one is this. We must renew our minds and feed our hearts with God's Word. We must renew our minds and feed our hearts with the Word of God. We began in 1 Peter 1:13. He said, "Gird up the loins of your mind." It was an idiom for the day. It meant get ready to work. When they were going to work, they had these long tunics. They would tuck them into their belt so that they were free to work. Our idiom today means the exact same thing. "Okay, roll up your sleeves and get ready. Roll up your sleeves and get ready to work." The kind of work he is talking about has to do with our thinking. Gird up the loins of your mind. Roll up your sleeves and get ready to start working on your thinking. Notice, he addresses our thinking before he addresses our actions. He says, "Work on your thinking." Then he said, "Hey, start living a holy, separated life to God." He dealt with the thinking first of all. He said, "Don't be conformed to this world and live like you used to. Live set apart lives." That word conformed is found elsewhere in the New Testament. I bet you would recognize where. Romans 12:2 NKJV, it's the same Greek word.

² And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind.

Don't be conformed to this world, to the way it sets its priorities, to its values, to its speech, and its actions, but be transformed. Now, the word transformed is a Greek word, *metamorphoō*. The English word metamorphosis comes from it. It literally means "to allow what's on the inside to work its way to the outside." I've been born again. I've received the life of God in my spirit. The Bible says the love of God has been poured out in my heart. God has given to each man a measure of faith. There are good things inside of me. The apostle Paul said, "I delight in the law of God after the inward man." So, God has put these good things, these holy things, these eternal things in my heart. How do I get what's on the inside to the outside? How do I take what

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God's put in here and let it translate into the way I love my wife, my kids, the way I work, the way I interact with people, and the way I treat my enemies? How does that happen? How do I live a transformed life? By the renewing of my mind. I have to change my thinking.

Friend, I'm going to tell you that it is important where you feed. The things you listen to do make a difference in your life. Because if we are not continually in this process of being transformed by renewing our mind—you need to realize that the world, your flesh, and the devil, are going to work overtime to see that you're conformed. If you're not being transformed, you are being conformed. It's either going to be one or the other. Notice he said, "Look, roll up your sleeves. This is going to take work." You need to have a love affair with your Bible. You need to spend time in the Word. Jesus said, "The words I speak to you are spirit, and they are life". They are charged with supernatural energy. If you don't, you will forever be a high-maintenance, low-impact Christian that reflects the spirit of the world instead of reflecting Christ. God has better things for you.

I remember, and you may have heard me share this story. We had a guy and his girlfriend come to church years and years ago. He was an outlaw biker. His girlfriend actually told me the story. He told me his story later on. He was extremely violent. He and his buddies were involved in organized crime. He always carried weapons on him and just lived a very, very violent lifestyle. They were having a party in their little house, and things turned extremely violent. In the morning, she just said, "Look, I'm done." It turns out she's a backslidden Pentecostal girl. She says, "I'm going back to church. I need Jesus." He said, "I'll go with you." They came to Cottonwood because her parents went to our church. He came with her. He walked in with a chip on his shoulder about the size of a redwood. This little lady, named Mary, was a greeter. She saw him, hugged him by the neck, and wouldn't let go. It totally threw him off balance. He just didn't see it coming. He sat in the service, and he started to cry. He got saved that day.

I don't know, it was maybe a month, maybe two months later, I walk into the office, and he's sitting in a chair, and he's sobbing. The secretary looks at me, and I go, "Man, what's going on?" I sat down next to him. He's sobbing. He's saying, "Pastor, I've been reading my Bible. My girlfriend and I are living together. I know it's not God's way. We're not married. It's not right." He's boo-hooing. He said, "But I don't know what to do. We can barely afford the rent on our little place. We can't afford two places. I don't know what to do, but I know it's not right." We prayed together that God would give him wisdom and just encourage him to do the right thing. He contacted me a couple of days later. The next day, a buddy of his said, "Look, I got an old couch in the garage. Why don't you sleep in my garage until you guys get married?" So that's what he did. For months and months, he slept on this old ratty couch in a buddy's garage and let her have the house. Then, I performed their wedding later on. He went on to be a pastor. Now, the Word of God took what was on the inside and brought it to the outside.

You see, Jesus said of His disciples when He prayed, "They're not of the world just like I'm not of the world." We're in the world, but we're not of it. It's like you get a boat in the water. Everything is fine with a boat in the water, but when the water starts to get into the boat, you have a problem. I'm in the world, but I'm not of it. If the world starts to get in me, we have a problem. I'm going to be thinking the wrong way. I'm going to have the wrong values. I'm going to have the wrong priorities. Consider these verses of Scripture. Psalm 119:9 NKJV,

⁹ How can a young man cleanse his way? By taking heed according to Your word.

By the way, old guys, this isn't just for the young guys. How can an old guy cleanse his way? How can an old gal and a young gal cleanse their way? By taking heed according to God's

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Word. The Word of God will help you change. The Bible says to flee youthful lusts, and I think most of us know you don't have to be young to have youthful lusts. Guys, I hate to tell you this. I have bad news. It never goes away. As long as you're in this flesh and blood body—I'm going to be 70 in a few days. It hasn't gone away. My flesh still wants to do stupid things. It still wants to pull me in the wrong direction. But thank God, as I renew my mind with the Word of God through my born-again nature and letting the Holy Spirit influence me, I can bring my flesh under subjection. But some guy's going, "When is it going to go away?" It's not. As long as you're living in this fallen world and you're in that flesh and blood body, there is going to be a struggle. But friend, you can win the fight. It's a fight that you can win. You don't have to give up. You don't have to cave in. We can win the fight. He goes on, verse 11 in the same Psalm,

¹¹ Your word I have hidden in my heart, that I might not sin against You.

Jesus prayed in John 17:17 NLT,

¹⁷ Make them holy by your truth; teach them your word, which is truth.

First John 2:14 NKJV,

¹⁴ I have written to you, young men, because you are strong, and the word of God abides in you, and you have overcome the wicked one.

Friend, there'll be no strength. There'll be no overcoming if the Word of God does not abide in our hearts. It is so important that you get into the Word and get His Word into you. It'll change your life. Just a little side thought for you. Back to 1 Peter 1:22 NKJV. It says,

²² Since you have purified your souls in obeying the truth (which is His Word) through the Spirit in sincere love of the brethren, love one another fervently with a pure heart.

He's talking about having a purified soul. Again, the idea is to live in a holy life. So, he talks about holy living and fervent love. Not just one, but both. Holy living, fervent love. We need both of them. We need a standard of holiness, but we also need fervent love. Because love without a standard of holiness leads to sloppy living. I hear it quite often. People will challenge Christians and say, "Well, hey, isn't Jesus all about love? You don't love everyone because you don't agree." Friend, love is not agreeing, and it's not affirming sinfulness. First Corinthians 13 says, "Love does not rejoice in iniquity, but love rejoices in the truth." Now, Jesus met people in their sinfulness, but He did not affirm them in their sinfulness. He showed them mercy and said, "Go and sin no more." So, if we just have love without a standard of holiness, it will lead to sloppy, sinful living. But on the other hand, a standard of holiness without love just leads to cruel legalism and that will kill you. We need holiness and love. We need truth, and we need grace. We need them both. By the way, that's for free. The next verse, 1 Peter 1:23 NKJV,

²³ . . . having been born again, not of corruptible seed but incorruptible, through the word of God which lives and abides forever.

So that's how we began this life. First Peter 2:2 NKJV,

² As newborn babes, desire the pure milk of the word, that you may grow thereby.

That's how we mature and continue in this life. It starts by being born of the Word. We go from faith to faith, from glory to glory as we live by His Word. The second thing that is essential—

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First, you have to renew your mind and feed your heart with the Word. The second thing that is essential if we're going to live transformed lives, if we're going to live holy before God, faith displaying lives, is that we must keep Jesus as the central focus of our lives. He must remain the central focus of our lives. Consider just from these short verses we're reading. Chapter 1:13 speaks about Jesus, who is coming. Verse 19, Jesus, who spilled His precious blood. Verse 20, Jesus, who was foreordained. Verse 21, Jesus, who was raised and glorified. Chapter 2:3, Jesus the gracious Lord. Verse 4, Jesus, the living stone chosen by God and precious. Verse 5, Jesus, through whom we offer spiritual sacrifices to God. Verse 6, Jesus, the chief cornerstone. Verse 7, Jesus, who is precious to believers. Verse 8, Jesus, who is the stone that the willfully disobedient stumble over. Verse 19, Jesus, who called us out of darkness into His marvelous light. Friend, just in these short verses, there are no less than 12 references to Jesus. In fact, look with me in 1 Peter 2:7–8 NKJV. “Therefore, to you who believe He is precious.” It's one way you know if a person is saved—Jesus is precious to them.

⁷ Therefore, to you who believe, He is precious; but to those who are disobedient, “The stone which the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone,” ⁸ and “A stone of stumbling and a rock of offense.” They stumble, being disobedient to the word, to which they also were appointed.

If Jesus is not precious to you, He will be offensive to you. There is no middle ground. It calls Him the chief cornerstone. Especially in the ancient world, the cornerstone was laid out exactly north, south, east, and west. Exact dimensions. Then, from that point, every measurement from the building, everything that was built, they went back to the cornerstone to make sure that it lined up. They got all of their measurements, all of their direction from where the cornerstone was laid. They would go back to it continually to make sure that nothing was out of line with the chief cornerstone. It's also referred to as the foundation stone that ensures that the entire structure is stable as well as being aligned. Jesus is our source of stability and direction. Do you have a question? “Is this right? Is that right?” Go back to the cornerstone. “Does this line up with the cornerstone? Does this line up with what Jesus had to say? What about this?” Go back to the cornerstone. Go back to the living Word. Is it in line with the living Word?

I was invited years ago to go speak in a particular African nation. A friend of mine had been instrumental in a new government coming in. It was actually a peaceful handoff. There was almost a civil war, but it ended up being a peaceful handoff to a new government. He played a big role in it. He was also a minister of the gospel. He and his family began to watch Cottonwood online. He invited me to come. He wanted me to meet several government officials and some of the most influential pastors and leaders in the church in his nation. I fly over there. I come. We have a big luncheon. All these pastors and leaders are there. One of the guys looks at me and says, “Pastor Bayless, we're so glad you're here. I bring you greetings, and I bring you greetings from my three wives.” I said, “Thanks, thanks, thanks.” It was just quiet at the table. Then, he burst out and starts laughing. Everybody at the table burst out, and they start laughing. He says, “Actually, in our culture and in my tribe, it's very common to have multiple wives. In fact, our president, who's from the same tribe that I am, has four wives. He has a couple of other women on the side besides that.” He basically said, “I went back to the cornerstone. The Scripture says, ‘Does anyone desire the office of a bishop? He desires good work, but a bishop must be the husband of one wife.’” He said, “I went back to the cornerstone to find out what was right.” Listen, the cornerstone trumps culture, and it trumps politics. Whether it's politically correct or not, whether it's culturally correct or not, friend, you need to get your measurements and your alignment from the cornerstone, not from society, and not from what the world says. Go back to the cornerstone. Then, because of what Christ has done in 1 Peter 2:9 NKJV, this is what we have, this is who we are.

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⁹ But you are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, His own special people, that you may proclaim the praises of Him who called you out of darkness into His marvelous light.

We need to proclaim His works and His praises to an unsaved watching world. According to this, we're chosen, royal, holy, and special. The thing that makes us special is the fact that we're connected to Jesus. That's what makes us special. Janet and I were invited to a couple's house many years ago. They attended here at Cottonwood, and they had a beautiful home. I remember I walked in just thinking, "Gosh, this house is gorgeous." The guy was a gun collector. He had a bunch of guns from the old west and a bunch of guns from different places in the world, different generations, a lot of old stuff. He said, "Do you want to see my gun collection?" I said, "Sure." I was pretty fascinated. He's talking about this one and that one. He says, "And this is my prize." He handed me a very, very old lever action 50 caliber rifle. He said, "You'll notice there's some cosmetic damage on the barrel. I paid \$900 for this at a gun show." I said, "It's pretty cool." He said, "When I got home, I thought, well, they used to unscrew the butt plate, and they used to put a cleaning rod inside, if you take off the butt plate on some of these old guns. So, when I got home, I decided to take off the butt plate. I unscrewed it and let me show you." So, he unscrews the butt plate, reaches inside, and pulls out this old, yellow, folded piece of paper. In fact, it was 130 years old. He unrolled it. He said, "Look at this." It said property of William Cody, Wyoming territory. It was Buffalo Bill's rifle. I suddenly realized that the rifle I was holding was worth far more than the house I was standing in. The thing that made it special was who it was connected to. You may not feel like it, my friend, but if you're connected to Jesus, you are special. You are royalty. You are God's own chosen people.

In these verses we read, it speaks of Jesus as the chief cornerstone. He's the stumbling stone. In Isaiah 28, He's the foundation stone. In Deuteronomy 32, He's the rock of salvation. In 2 Samuel 22, He's the fortress rock. In Psalm 62, He's the rock of strength. In Daniel 2, He's the rock that grew and filled the whole earth. In Exodus 17, He's the rock that produced water in the wilderness for God's thirsty people. In Isaiah 26, He's the rock of ages. If you're not building your life on Him, you will be offended by Him. If you will accept Him and submit your life to Him, you can be saved. Otherwise, you will reject Him and stumble into an eternity without God. There is just no middle ground when it comes to Jesus. He's more than just a good man. He's more than just a teacher. More than just a good guy who died as a token for His fellow man.

Do you know thousands of people were crucified like Jesus was crucified? Many of you know the story of Spartacus, the Roman gladiator. He led a revolt, and they held off Rome for several years. Eventually, he was captured. He was a slave trying to free other slaves. They crucified him along with thousands of others along the Appian Way. Jesus was crucified just like they were. Jesus wasn't a slave trying to free slaves. He was the only free man, the only perfect man, and the only man who hadn't been touched and tainted by sin. He died as our representative. He died as our substitute upon the cross. God laid upon Jesus, by substitution, all of my sin, all of the penalty for my wrongdoing, everything that's gone wrong with my life and wrong with the whole world, on Jesus. Jesus willingly died under the weight of that sin. After three days and three nights, when the claims of God's eternal justice were satisfied, Jesus was raised from the dead by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Now, the Bible says if you believe that, and if you're willing to submit your life to Him, to call Him Lord and Lord is not just some magic word that you throw out. It means boss. When you call Him Lord, it means you're saying, "I die to my rights of independent living, and I'm going to live your way, Jesus. I give You my heart. I submit my life to You." It doesn't work on any other

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terms. If you make Him the Lord of your life, you can be saved. Then comes the tough work of renewing your mind and allowing what God puts in you at the moment of salvation to work its way to the outside. Sometimes it's tough, but it's also glorious to live for God, and it will be worth it all when we stand in eternity. Many of you have heard my story. As long as I can remember, from the time I was a little kid, I asked questions. I was looking for God, just looking in all the wrong places. Honestly, I didn't know that God was who I was looking for the whole time. I just knew I had a hole in my heart the size of the Grand Canyon. I tried to fill it with drugs and alcohol for many years. It never filled the empty place. Some of you have done the same thing. You've medicated yourself because you're aware. You look in the mirror and think, "Man, something is broken inside of me, and I don't know how to fix it."

Some of you have tried to fill it with sex or relationships. You run from boyfriend to boyfriend. You divorce your wife. You get yourself a new, younger model, and suddenly, you realize that wasn't the answer. "Well, maybe I need somebody else." Or people even try to fill that empty place with religious ritual and good works, but it doesn't fill it. Money and things can't fill it. It's a God-shaped vacuum. Only as you come to God through His Son, Jesus Christ, will that empty place be filled. He won't turn you away if you come. You might say, "Well, Bayless, you don't know. You don't know what I've done. You don't know how low I've stooped." It doesn't matter. Jesus died for every one of your sins. It is the glorious grace of God, and if you'll humble yourself and come to Him, He'll change you. You need to make the choice to receive Him. I'm going to pray with you in just a moment. If you'll say the words with sincerity from your heart to God, He'll hear you. I got saved in a street mission in a place called Medford, Oregon. Long story how I got there, but about 100 people were present, mostly homeless people, drug addicts, and alcoholics.

I still remember. I'm sitting in the front row. I had a skin-tight pair of bright orange pants with yellow stripes down the side. I had a little sweatshirt on. I hadn't cut my hair in seven years. It was long. I used to braid it and put feathers in it. I had a long beard. Everything every person said up there was speaking to me, and I knew it was God talking to me. They gave an invitation. I was the only one who responded. No one else came up. I collapsed into this guy's arms, and I sobbed into this stranger's chest for about 15 minutes, I think. People gathered around me, a whole bunch of them, and put their hands on me and started praying for me. From that day to this day, it's been almost 50 years, and I've never had another illegal drug in my body. Jesus set me free that day. He can set you free. Wherever you're watching, anywhere around the world, out on the plaza, it's not a coincidence we're together right now here in this house. If you'll give your heart to Jesus, my friend, He will wrap you in His arms, and He will change you. His Holy Spirit will change you from the inside out.

Just bow your heads and close your eyes just for a moment. I just want to ask, nobody is looking around but me right now. If you say, "Bayless, I need to pray that prayer." I'm going to ask you to do something I believe will help you. I want you to just lift your hand. Just lift it up. Nobody is looking but me. Say, "Man, I need to pray the prayer. I'm a backslider. I need to come home. I'm making my life right with Jesus today." Just lift it high. It's an outward way to express what your heart is doing. Your heart is reaching up to God. Your hand is reflecting that. Awesome. All across the auditorium. It is not coincidental you're here. God is reaching you, my friend. Put your hands down. Everybody put a hand on your heart, and let's just speak these words to God. Say,

Dear God, thank You for salvation. I believe that You can do what I have not been able to do myself. I put my trust in You and in Your Son, Jesus Christ, who I believe died in my place and took my sins away on the cross. I believe He was raised from the

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dead, and I embrace Jesus Christ now. Jesus, come into my heart. I confess You as my Lord and Savior. From this moment onward, wherever You lead me, I will go. I'm Yours, Jesus. I'm all in. Amen. Amen. Fantastic.

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