

⁹ But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light. ¹⁰ Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.

¹¹ Dear friends, I urge you, as aliens and strangers in the world, to abstain from sinful desires, which war against your soul. ¹² Live such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us.

Think about how Peter addresses Christians in today's text. **Holy, chosen, royal priesthood.** . . . wow. You couldn't get any better than that! Peter was wanting his audience (both Jews and Gentiles) – AND us - to identify ourselves – yes – us – corrupted sinners that we are – as especially chosen and holy royalty. This is not something we are to aspire to be. This is something that we *are*, just as Jesus says you ARE the light of the world. How can Peter say this? How could he say that to me, when my kids know how impatient I can be? How can he say that to you, when he hears the thoughts you think about people?

Here we have the heart and core of true Christianity. It isn't about being better people or just improving your life. It's always been about being completely holy in spite of our sin. When Jesus came, He came to give us all of it; not some of it. He didn't come just to be a good example on Christian living; to show us how to do it right. He came to be our complete Savior; from head to toe; beginning to end; to pay for each and every one of our sins. To make us truly look HOLY in HIS sight – in one way; through faith in Jesus Christ. That's the beauty of Christianity. In my baptism I have all of Jesus righteousness; not some of it. In my baptism and through faith I don't just cling to some of Jesus. I get all of Him; all of His glorious excuse on the cross. Jesus came to set me apart from the world. He came so that all of those He has adopted into His family could really be holy kings and priests in His sight. God accepts the sacrifices I make for him, not because they are so much better than anyone else, but because of His grace and mercy. This is the glorious Light that faith in Christ brings. I've got it all right now; through faith ALONE. I don't have to earn it. I've already been given it as a gift of God's free grace. Christianity isn't about doing this and that to become holy; it's about the fact that God declares us holy, chosen and royal because of Christ.

All of these terms – holy, chosen, royal priesthood - are actually borrowed from the Old Testament. You can't see it in the New International Version of the New Testament, but in the Greek version these words are found in **bold print**. This means that there were Old Testament texts in mind. Come to find out, this was how God referred to the Old Testament Jews as well. When you look at the context from which they are drawn, it is interesting to see what God says. Take for instance the "holy nation" reference. God used that at the foot of Mount Sinai through Moses the prophet. He said to the Israelites in Exodus 19 – just prior to giving them the Ten Commandments –

“This is what you are to say to the house of Jacob and what you are to tell the people of Israel: 4 ‘You yourselves have seen what I did to Egypt, and how I carried you on eagles’ wings and brought you to myself. 5 Now if you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all nations you will be my treasured possession. Although the whole earth is mine, 6 you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.’ These are the words you are to speak to the Israelites.”

First of all God reminded the Israelites of how HE brought them from slavery in Egypt and rescued them. Their status was brought about through HIS RESCUE. He separated them from their captors and brought them to their own land. They would be the ones through whom He would ordain sacrifices to approach God; and through which He would give the ultimate sacrifice on the cross. Their holiness was not based on their behavior, but on the way God treated them.

In Deuteronomy chapter 7 God also referenced this whole relationship that God was establishing with the Israelites. Now, this is a rather lengthy quote, but it is important again to understand what God was doing for the Israelites and how He was establishing a relationship with them. He wrote –

When the LORD your God brings you into the land you are entering to possess and drives out before you many nations— seven nations larger and stronger than you— 2 and when the LORD your God has delivered them over to you and you have defeated them, then you must destroy them totally. Make no treaty with them, and show them no mercy. 3 Do not intermarry with them. Do not give your daughters to their sons or take their daughters for your sons, 4 for they will turn your sons away from following me to serve other gods, and the LORD’s anger will burn against you and will quickly destroy you. 5 This is what you are to do to them: Break down their altars, smash their sacred stones, cut down their Asherah poles and burn their idols in the fire. 6 For you are a people holy to the LORD your God. The LORD your God has chosen you out of all the peoples on the face of the earth to be his people, his treasured possession.

7 The LORD did not set his affection on you and choose you because you were more numerous than other peoples, for you were the fewest of all peoples. 8 But it was because the LORD loved you and kept the oath he swore to your forefathers that he brought you out with a mighty hand and redeemed you from the land of slavery, from the power of Pharaoh king of Egypt. 9 Know therefore that the LORD your God is God; he is the faithful God, keeping his covenant of love to a thousand generations of those who love him and keep his commands. 10 But those who hate him he will repay to their face by destruction; he will not be slow to repay to their face those who hate him.

The LORD wanted them to have a sense of privilege and honor to have been chosen by the LORD and regarded as holy. He reminded them that the reason He chose them was NOT because they were bigger and better than the other nations. He did it because He swore to Abraham that He would do bless all people through him. He would send the Savior through the Jews.

As a result of this, He wanted the Israelites not to mingle in with the rest of the nations; He didn’t want them to worship their gods or marry their children. He actually told them to smash their altars and even destroy those who refused to leave the Promised Land. If these nations wanted to stay and fight; the Israelites needed to be willing to fight and destroy so that they wouldn’t be corrupted by these false gods. The Israelites were going to be treated special by God and regarded as holy, and God wanted them to know it and to live like it.

So Peter uses the same terms with the Christians who were living in Asia Minor. He said that God **called you out of darkness into his wonderful light.** Think about that concept. Imagine living in a dark cave, being lost and alone; unable to see a thing. But you hear a voice out in the distance calling your name. It says to you, “Follow me! I’ve got warmth and light! I’ve got food and shelter! I’ve got love and companionship.” You follow the voice, and it leads you to the light. You find everything you were promised. This is the call of the Gospel; where the Holy Spirit leads us to Christ; THE LIGHT OF THE WORLD; where you can see what a loving God you have. This isn’t just a glimmer of light. He is the MARVELOUS light; the dazzling light; here you can see a God who loves you; who died for you; who adopted you; how you have full forgiveness in Christ. You can’t help but see the world differently as you live in this Light. Forget about how much you make; how you look; how smart you are or how good you are at sports; this is what evokes praise; your holiness.

If you’re embarrassed over this; if you don’t like your friends knowing that you go to church; if you’re ashamed to have someone see you pray before you eat; if you don’t think about and cherish your baptism; if you’d rather just blend in with the crowd; if you don’t want to be special; then you aren’t living how God wants you to live; how He called you to live.

In India they have an actor that many people actually regard as a demi-god. His name is Rajinikanth. People put his posters all over the place. They make offerings to him; even though he doesn't take himself that seriously. If you were to ridicule him there; some people would actually attack you. It would seem ridiculous to other Americans if they saw you wear his clothing or put his posters up on your wall. How much more ridiculous is it to GOD when He sees the way you get influenced with your clothing and the people you admire? How sad is it to God to see us spend the money and time on the things that we do; that we get so worked up over such trivial things and think they are so important?

Isn't it embarrassing to think how God calls us from this world; and we can't even depart from it for one hour? Is there anything really that important that you can't miss for an hour while you hear God's Word? Think too about how you dress and what you obsess about? Why would you care how big your body parts are? Does that really make a difference in God's sight? Why do you hang the posters up of people that you do? What attracts you to them? Why do you admire them?

You see, these are things that God wants you to be conflicted about. Do they match your identity or not? Do they do anything for your relationship with Jesus? Listen to what he says again,

Dear friends, I urge you, as aliens and strangers in the world, to abstain from sinful desires, which war against your soul.

Just as God expected the Israelites to FIGHT IN the Promised Land; so God expects you to fight ESPECIALLY NOW against the devil, the world, and your own flesh. Don't forget to FIGHT.

Peter says that these temptations don't just pick at your soul. He says they MAKE WAR against your soul. They attack and they attack. Christians are people who FIGHT against temptation; fight against wanting to be like everyone else; fight against wanting to blend in. It's always been a struggle. It has to be.

Have you given up the fight? Why is it ok that 67% of our people are missing from worship every Sunday? Should we be resigned to the fact that "kids will be kids" when we hear them talk back to their parents or are found with promiscuous material on the Internet? We throw up our hands at sin and say, "What can we do? Our kids don't want to listen to us. Nobody wants to cooperate." We can keep fighting! There is almost no distinction between Christians and unbelievers. Why is that? A part of it is because we don't cherish who we are and because we aren't fighting. Lord, help us to regard this as an honor and a privilege. Help us to fight on your behalf – by resisting our own temptations to do what we know would anger you.

Ultimately, what God wants is for people to be ATTRACTED to Him; so that they too can see the Light of Christ and be saved. It isn't rocket science on how to do this.

¹² Live such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us.

Think about what God is saying here. What a risk! He wants to attract people to Himself through YOU – sinful and yet HOLY you.

What if your life has been an embarrassment? You can't take back your past mistakes. You can't undo them. But that doesn't mean that you have to dwell on that. What do you do with your sin? You repent of them, and cling all the more to Christ. You cherish all the more His Supper. You appreciate all the more your baptism. You cherish the fact that God's mercies are new every morning. You pray, "Lord, help me to cling all the more to your forgiveness and declaration of holiness. Help me never to embarrass you like that again."

What is it that stands out in our society more than ever? It's found in a child that is hard working and respectable. How many kids do you know that refer to their elders as "sir" and "ma'am" – that show RESPECT? It's found in a couple that is patient and kind and loving to each other; that speak highly of each other; that hold hands with each other; that teach their children to sing and pray in church and work an honest day's wages. It's found in the husband who learns to pay attention to his wife and care for her needs – in the man who takes his family to worship and prays for them around the family table. It's found in the wife who learns to admire her husband and honor his strengths; who supports what he does to take care of his family and to spiritually lead them. It's found in Christians who are willing to take the time to listen and pray for and witness to people who are hurting. It's found in Christians who are willing to say "I repent. I'm sorry." and "I forgive you."

Peter is calling for exceptionalism in your life; not mediocrity. Why? Not in order to get holy, but because God has given you the honor of already being called holy in Christ. Not in order that people praise us for how great we are. We do it in hopes that people will **see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us**. We want others to be attracted to Christ.

Think about the night that Jesus was betrayed. A band of soldiers came out looking for Jesus with swords and torches. Blood was in their eyes. They were looking to kill Jesus. When they came to Jesus with deadly intent, He didn't hesitate to identify Himself. He wasn't ashamed of it. It was shocking to those who came. They fell back in wonder. Even when Peter struck Malchus' ear, Jesus remained Himself by healing the man's ear. He did a wonderful miracle for that man. Even in the midst of darkness He let His Light shine. Then they crucified Him.

Jesus went to the cross so that He could be identified with you in the fullest extent; so He could be your sin and die under it; so that He could create a way to call you His holy children. It is finished.

The swords and torches are now coming for you. You don't need to hide. You don't need to be afraid. Let them come. Make it easy for them to find you, even if they have bad intent. Why? Because you're God's child. You've been adopted by Him. In His eyes; you are the royal and holy people of God. As Jesus reached out to Malchus, reach out to them. Let them see the healing love of Christ; in hopes too that they will repent of their sins; see the Light and be saved. That's what Epiphany is about. Amen.