

1 Peter 1:17–21 (Part I)

Introduction

After the indicative (the “how things **are**”) of verses 1-12, we’ve come to the imperative (the “how things **must be**” *in light of* “how things **are**”) beginning in verse 13. We’ve seen that this next section is built around five imperatives and we reflected on the first two of these imperatives last week: “**Set you hope** fully on the grace that will be brought to you at the revelation of Jesus Christ” (v. 13) and “as he who called you is holy, you also **be holy** in all your conduct.” (v. 15) Remember that along with these imperatives there were participles (“ing’s”)—as well as other, different kinds of phrases—helping us to more fully understand God’s commands and how to live in obedience to them:

Therefore, **having** girded up the loins of your mind,
and **being** sober-minded,

set your hope fully on the grace that will be brought to you at the revelation of Jesus Christ.

As obedient children,
not **being** conformed to the lusts of your former ignorance;
but **as** he who called you is holy,

you also be holy in all your conduct,
since it is written, “You shall be holy, for I am holy.”

Have you been girding up the loins of your mind and are you being sober-minded? Are you setting your hope fully on the grace that will be brought to you at the revelation of Jesus Christ? And are you living and practicing the kind of holiness that is unceasingly being taught and instructed and shaped by this hope?

This morning, we come to the third of these five imperatives, which is once again surrounded by participles and other phrases helping us to understand what this imperative means and how to live in full obedience to it (we’ll see one of these this week, and the rest next week).

I. 1 Peter 1:17 — And **if** you call on him as Father who judges impartially according to each one’s work, **conduct yourselves with fear** throughout the time of your exile...

So, let’s take just a minute to try and set this up. In the Bible, that word for “calling” on God is really almost an official title or name for Christians because it describes the very essence of what a true Christian is – he’s simply one who calls upon God and cries out to Him for rescue and salvation. I love how wonderful, and beautiful, and simple that is.

- Acts 9:14 (cf. 9:21) — Here [Saul] has authority from the chief priests to bind all who call on your name.
- Acts 22:16 — Rise and be baptized and wash away your sins, calling on his name.
- Romans 10:12–13 (cf. Acts 2:21) — The same Lord is Lord of all, bestowing his riches on all who call on him. For “everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.”

- 1 Corinthians 1:2 (cf. 2 Tim. 2:22) — To the church of God that is in Corinth... together with all those who in every place call upon the name of our Lord Jesus Christ...

Are you one who can be most simply described as one who calls out to the Lord, and cries out to Him for rescue and salvation?

So here, Peter takes this most basic description of the true Christian and uses it to preface this third imperative: “And if you **call on him as Father** who judges impartially according to each one’s work, conduct yourselves with fear throughout the time of your exile...” What do you think Peter is saying here? Is he saying that *even though* we call on God as Father, we still can’t forget that He’s also the Judge? To put it the other way around, is he saying that *even though* God is the Judge and we are to live with fear during the time of our exile we still need to keep on remembering that He’s also our Father? This is how we can all be so easily tempted to think, isn’t it?—As though God as Father and God as Judge were somehow always in tension with each other and always having to balance each other out. But this kind of thinking would have been completely foreign to Peter.

Where **we** might feel that this is something passing strange, **Peter** actually says that the *reason* we fear the one who will judge impartially is *because* this is the very one **we all call upon as Father**. (cf. 1:3, 14) Did you see that? And does that even make sense to us? So here’s the point: As Christians, of all people, we should fear God because *we* are not ignorant—because of all people, *we* know that this is the God who judges impartially according to each person’s work. And *why* do we, of all people, know this? Precisely *because* we are the ones who call upon this impartial Judge **as Father!**¹

So let’s go back to almost the very first word of this sentence. Peter says: “And **if** you call on him as Father who judges impartially according to each one’s work, conduct yourselves with fear throughout the time of your exile.” When Peter says “**if**” he’s inviting us to ask ourselves a question. **Do I call on God as Father?** Then of all people in all the world I am the one who should be conducting myself with fear throughout the time of my exile. But if I’m not fearing and trembling, then I have to ask myself: Can I really be, in truth, calling upon God as *Father*? To sum it all up: It’s true that others may not fear and tremble because they’re still suppressing the truth in unrighteousness, but we do fear and tremble precisely because we know and have believed the truth. It’s precisely because we call upon God as Father that we know better than anyone else that He is the one who judges impartially according to each one’s work.

What Peter has in mind here is ultimately the final judgment – the day on which we will all stand before the judgement seat of God. (cf. 1 Pet. 4:5, 17) And what we know is that on that day, God isn’t going to show any partiality or favoritism – not even to Christians. God isn’t going to set the bar any lower for us. We aren’t going to get off easier than everyone else just because we’re “Christians.” We see this emphasized over and over again in the Scriptures.

- Deuteronomy 10:16–17 — Circumcise therefore the foreskin of your heart, and be no longer stubborn. For the LORD your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great, the mighty, and the awesome God, who is not partial and takes no bribe.

¹ cf. Michaels; Jobes; contra Achtemeier

- Colossians 3:23–25 (cf. Eph. 6:9; Gal. 2:6) — Whatever you do, work heartily, as for the Lord and not for men, knowing that from the Lord you will receive the inheritance as your reward. You are serving the Lord Christ. For the wrongdoer will be paid back for the wrong he has done, and there is no partiality.
- Romans 2:9–11 (cf. vv. 3-8) — There will be tribulation and distress for every human being who does evil, the Jew first and also the Greek, but glory and honor and peace for everyone who does good, the Jew first and also the Greek. For God shows no partiality.

The Bible clearly teaches us that the God we call upon as Father is no respecter of persons— **whether Christian or non-Christian**—and so no judge in all the history of the world will ever be as perfectly **fair** and as perfectly **just** as God will be on the day of judgment. Is that not a sobering thought? How could this be at all true and yet we still not fear?

II. Judgment based on works

But what are we all thinking now? – I thought salvation was all of grace! That’s not just what we *think*, that’s the truth! Salvation **IS** all of grace. But that doesn’t mean that the final judgment will not be “fair” and just, and in perfect accordance with the **life** we’ve lived and the **works** we’ve done. There will be no person condemned on the Day of Judgment whose life and works were more worthy of praise than the life and works of those who are rewarded with salvation. “Shall not the Judge of all the earth do what is just?” (Gen. 18:25) In fact, there will be no one condemned on the Day of Judgment whose works were at all praiseworthy, and there will be no one saved whose life and works (after trusting in Christ) were not praiseworthy. Revelation chapter ten describes the final judgment of the righteous and the unrighteous with a special emphasis on the punishment of the wicked.

- Revelation 20:12–15 — And I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne, and books were opened. Then another book was opened, which is the book of life. And the dead were judged by what was written in the books, **according to what they had done**. And the sea gave up the dead who were in it, Death and Hades gave up the dead who were in them, and they were judged, each one of them, **according to what they had done**. Then Death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. This is the second death, the lake of fire. And **if anyone’s name was not found written in the book of life**, he was thrown into the lake of fire.

There are some who suggest that the righteous aren’t actually included in this judgment. But aside from the fact that everything in the text implies they are and nothing in the text implies they’re not, I would simply ask: “Why should the righteous not be included at this judgment?” Are we afraid that if the righteous show up at this judgment they might be found “worthy” of eternal life according to their works, and that somehow this would contradict salvation by grace alone? But I have to ask again: “Shall not the Judge of all the earth do what is just” – and even what is right and fair? (Gen. 18:25) Do we really think that on the day of judgment God is going to show partiality and favoritism to the “Christians” by either exempting them from the judgment or holding them to a different standard – a standard that has nothing to do with their works or with the life they’ve lived? The Apostle James goes to great lengths to refute this false idea.

- James 2:20–24 — Do you want to be shown, you foolish person, that faith apart from works is useless? Was not Abraham our father **justified BY works** having offered up his son Isaac on the altar? You see that faith was active along with his works, and faith was completed by his works; and the Scripture was fulfilled that says, “Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness”—and he was called a friend of God. You see that a person is **justified BY works** and not by faith alone.

James is writing before Paul wrote any of his letters and he’s using the word “justified” to refer to something very different than what we think of when we think of Paul. Paul says:

- Romans 3:28 — For we hold that one is justified by faith apart from works of the law.

Paul is thinking of a past event when God declared us righteous on the basis of our being united with His Son Jesus Christ through faith. What an awesome miracle this is! So this *past* justification when we *first* entered into relationship with God had absolutely **nothing** to do with our works. Paul can truly say that we were justified by faith and **not by works**. But when James was writing, some years before Paul, he was thinking of justification not in terms of something already in the past, but something that we still await in the **future**. And so the justification that James thinks of is God’s acquittal and vindication of the believer on the Day of Judgment based on his works. This is a theme that runs throughout all of Scripture.

- Micah 6:11 — Shall I acquit [LXX: “justify”] the man with wicked scales and with a bag of deceitful weights?
- 1 Kings 8:31–32 — “If a man sins against his neighbor and is made to take an oath and comes and swears his oath before your altar in this house, then hear in heaven and act and judge your servants, condemning the guilty by bringing his conduct on his own head, and vindicating [LXX: justifying] the righteous by rewarding him according to his righteousness.
- Matthew 12:37 — By your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned.

So when James says that “a person is **justified BY works** and not by faith alone” he’s saying that a person is ultimately vindicated and proved to be “**worthy**” of eternal life on the day of judgment by his works and not by any so-called “faith” that exists all alone and all by itself. One commentator says it like this: “‘Justify’ in Paul refers to how a person gets into relationship with God, while in James it [signifies] **what that relationship MUST ultimately look like** to receive God’s final approval.”² (Moo; PNTC)

But isn’t this still just a sneaky way of saying that our salvation will be based in the end on our own merit and therefore something for us to boast about? **God forbid!** Did you notice that even

² “If a sinner can get into relationship with God only by faith (Paul), the ultimate validation of that relationship takes into account the works that true faith must inevitably produce (James). As Calvin puts it, ‘... as Paul contends that we are justified apart from the help of works, so James does not allow those who lack good works to be reckoned righteous.’” (cf. Moo; PNTC)

“The great white throne judgment is... based on the evidence written by the life of every person... the teaching of judgment by works runs throughout both the OT and the NT... The issue is not salvation by works but works as the irrefutable evidence of a person’s actual relationship with God. Salvation is by faith, but faith is inevitably revealed by the works it produces.” (Mounce; NICNT)

in James, even though we'll be justified **by** our works, these works are only, ever praiseworthy because they are the **fruit**—they are the living out—of our faith? James says that “faith was active along with [Abraham’s] works, and faith was completed by his works.” Throughout all of Scripture, the point is always this: True faith produces works like a true apple tree produces apples.

- Romans 1:5 — We have received grace and apostleship to bring about the **obedience of faith** for the sake of his name among all the nations.
- Galatians 5:6 — For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything, but only **faith working through love**.

Furthermore, it is actually faith that gives to our work the genuine and true **quality** of obedience and love – the obedience and love that are **praiseworthy** in God’s sight.

- Hebrews 11:6 — And **without faith it is impossible to please [God]**, for whoever would draw near to God must **believe** that he exists and that **he rewards** those who **seek him**.

On the other hand, the Scriptures also teach that “whatever does not proceed from faith is sin.” (Rom. 14:23) In other words, if true faith produces works that are worthy of praise before God, then what are we to think of “good works” that are **not** produced by faith? What are we to think of “apples” that are not produced by an apple tree? They’re not actually apples at all, but frauds and counterfeits. They’re works—no matter how “good” or “righteous”—that in God’s sight are of **no more worth or value** than bloodied and unclean garments. The prophet Isaiah speaks for the rebellious people of Israel in chapter Isaiah sixty-four:

- Isaiah 64:6 (cf. NET; Lev. 15:19-31) — We have all become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous deeds are like menstrual cloths.

Even what would appear to be the greatest and most obvious works of love and obedience, **if they are not produced and animated by faith**, will have nothing in them **at all** that is worthy of any praise **at all** on the final day of judgment. So when we stand before the judgment seat of God on that final day, the wicked will be condemned because their names were not found written in the Lamb’s book of life **and** therefore **because** none of their **works** could ever be **worthy** of God’s praise or reward – this is why they will rightly be called the **wicked**. Paul says in 1 Corinthians chapter six:

- 1 Corinthians 6:9 — Do you not know that **the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God**?

On the other hand, the righteous *will* be rewarded with eternal salvation because their names **were** found written in the Lamb’s book of life, **and** therefore **because** their lives and their **works were** found “**worthy**” of God’s praise and reward – this is why they are **called** the **righteous**!

- Matthew 13:41–43 — The Son of Man will send his angels, and they will gather out of his kingdom all causes of sin and all law-breakers, and throw them into the fiery furnace. In that

place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. Then **the righteous** will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father. He who has ears, let him hear.

Now, are you seeing, here, that being found **righteous** and **worthy** is NOT AT ALL the same thing as being found perfect – *OR* even being *good enough* to **merit** even the smallest thing from God?

- 2 Thessalonians 1:4–5 (cf. Luke 20:34) — Therefore we ourselves boast about you in the churches of God for your steadfastness and faith in all your persecutions and in the afflictions that you are enduring. This is evidence of the righteous judgment of God, that you may be **considered worthy of the kingdom of God**.

Do you think the Thessalonian Christians heard this and started boasting and bragging or thinking they had deserved or merited the kingdom of God? Not at all! And yet they knew that *if* and only *if* they persevered in **works** of righteousness and obedience in the midst of their afflictions would they be considered “worthy” of the kingdom of God.

- Revelation 3:1–4 — And to the angel of the church in Sardis write: “The words of him who has the seven spirits of God and the seven stars. ‘I know your works. You have the reputation of being alive, but you are dead. Wake up, and strengthen what remains and is about to die, for I have not found your works complete in the sight of my God. Remember, then, what you received and heard. Keep it, and repent. If you will not wake up, I will come like a thief, and you will not know at what hour I will come against you. Yet you have still a few names in Sardis, people who have not soiled their garments, and **they will walk with me in white, for they are worthy**.”

Once again, this “worthiness” is rooted 100% in God’s grace and is 100% to the glory of God’s grace, **and yet** it is still a worthiness that will prove the justice of God’s judgment when the unworthy (the wicked) are condemned to everlasting punishment and when the worthy (the righteous) are graciously **and justly** (in that order!) rewarded with life eternal. (cf. 1 Cor. 6:9-11; Gal. 5:19-24) Can you see, now, how there is no contradiction between salvation by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone and to the glory of God alone on the one hand, and on the other hand a final judgment of every human being who has ever lived that will be wholly in accordance with the lives we’ve lived and the works we’ve done? When it comes to eternal life, there will be no scales. There will be no weighing of one kind of work versus another kind of work to see which comes out on top. What it will come down to very simply is the presence of works—and of **a life**—that was produced and animated by faith, and it is **these works** that will show the perfect justice of God’s judgment on the final day – though in the end, we know that even these works were God’s gracious gift and provision for us.³

- Revelation 19:6–8 — Then I heard what seemed to be the voice of a great multitude, like the roar of many waters and like the sound of mighty peals of thunder, crying out, “Hallelujah!

³ We do know, however, that those who are granted eternal life because they were found “worthy” will still face a sifting and a refining and a judging whereby their works that were not produced and animate by faith are burned up and consumed. These two aspects of God’s judgment may not always be clearly separated or treated distinctly in Scripture. (cf. 1 Cor. 3:10-15; 2 Cor. 5:9-10; Rom. 14:10; 1 Pet. 4:17-18)

For the Lord our God the Almighty reigns. Let us rejoice and exult and give him the glory, for the marriage of the Lamb has come, and his Bride has made herself ready; **it was granted her** to clothe herself with fine linen, bright and pure”— for the fine linen is **the righteous deeds of the saints**.

So now I want to ask you again, “Shall not the Judge of all the earth do what is just?” As the Lord Himself says in Jeremiah chapter seventeen:

- Jeremiah 17:10 — I the LORD search the heart and test the mind, to give every man according to his ways, according to the fruit of his deeds.

So now it’s in light of all these things that we can come to three very important conclusions. First of all, salvation is all of grace from beginning to end. We can never “merit” or “earn” anything from God. There is never any room for boasting. We were justified and declared righteous on the basis of our union with Jesus through faith alone, and not by works of the law. Second of all, since salvation is all of God’s grace from beginning to end, so that there can never be any room for boasting, then neither can there be any room for being paralyzed with fear. There can never be any place for worrying that we may fail to produce **enough** of the **right kind** of works to **merit** God’s approval and the reward of eternal life. But this must not stop us from drawing also a third conclusion. We’ll come back, now, to Peter, and let him state it for us:

III. 1 Peter 1:17 — And **if** you call on him as Father who judges impartially according to each one’s work, **conduct yourselves with fear throughout the time of your exile...**

The point here is not God’s fatherly discipline of His children; the point is God’s final judgment of all human beings according to their **work**.⁴ Peter doesn’t say “works” because his focus is not on “a **list** of particular good deeds” (Michaels), but rather “one’s entire conduct, the **course** of [a person’s entire] life.” (Goppelt; cf. Schreiner) Remember the imperative from last week: “Be holy **in all your conduct**.” Why “in all your conduct?” Because holiness is simply the continuous living out of a hope that is set fully on the grace to be brought to us at the revelation of Jesus Christ (the first imperative). And so now we have the third imperative, which once again encompasses **all** of our living and **all** of our doing: “**Conduct yourselves with fear**.”

Some translations say “reverent fear,”⁵ and I think this is probably very helpful. Just so long as we don’t do what some translations do and translate with just “reverence” (NET) or even just “respect.” (NCV) Can you see that “reverence” and “respect” are not fitting words when what we have in mind is the impartial judgment seat of God on the final day? God is commanding us to conduct ourselves in all of life not with a “paralyzing fear,” but with a “reverent **fear**.” Maybe we could say: “Conduct yourselves in every aspect of your living always with a reverent fear and trembling.” Brothers and sisters, how can we not, **if** we have truly come to call upon Him as Father who **judges... impartially... according** to each one’s **work**? How can we not fear and tremble?

⁴ cf. Schreiner; contra Grudem

⁵ NIV; NRSV; NLT

And what impact will **this fear** have upon the daily living out of our lives? Why is it so important that we obey this command? Listen to how one commentator puts it:

“This fear is not cowardice: it [does] not debase [or paralyze], but elevates the mind; for it drowns all lower fears, and begets true fortitude and courage to encounter all dangers [and temptations], for the sake of a good conscience and the obeying of God.” (Leighton; quoted in Grudem)

What the church in America desperately needs today, and what all of us as Christians desperately need is a true fear and trembling at the thought that one day we will all stand before God at the final judgement, with heaven and hell at stake, and be judged according to our work. Peter hasn't forgotten all the “indicative” in verses 3-12, but neither has Paul when he writes in 2 Corinthians:

- 2 Corinthians 7:1 (cf. Acts 5:5, 11) — Since we have these promises, beloved, let us cleanse ourselves from every defilement of body and spirit, bringing holiness to completion **in the fear of God**.

And in Philippians chapter two:

- Philippians 2:12 (cf. 1 Tim. 5:20) — Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed, so now, not only as in my presence but much more in my absence, work out your own salvation **with fear and trembling**.

And listen to what Paul writes even about himself in 1 Corinthians chapter nine:

- 1 Corinthians 9:24–27 — Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one receives the prize? So run that you may obtain it. Every athlete exercises self-control in all things. They do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable. So I do not run aimlessly; I do not box as one beating the air. But I discipline my body and keep it under control, lest after preaching to others I myself should be disqualified [lest after preaching to others I myself should be condemned and cast out in the final judgment].

Brothers and sister, “**If** you call on him as Father who judges impartially according to each one's work, **conduct yourselves with fear** throughout the time of your exile...” There will come a time when we are finally and everlastingly confirmed and established in holiness and righteousness, and then there will no longer be any place for this “fear” of which Peter speaks. (cf. 1 Thess. 3:11-13; 1 Pet. 5:10) But as long as we're still living in exile—as resident foreigners in this world—we know that time has not yet arrived. (cf. Goppelt) And so until that time, let us never be so utterly foolish as to live our lives presuming upon the verdict of that final day. Let us never be so totally foolhardy as to live our lives without the true and genuine fear of the Lord.

Conclusion

Remember Peter's first imperative: “Set your hope fully on the grace to be brought to you at the revelation of Jesus Christ.” And then remember how Peter's second imperative flowed directly

out of the first: “Be holy in all your conduct.” And now we see how obedience to Peter’s third imperative is an essential part of obeying the first two. **If** we would hope (fully), and **if** we would be holy (truly), then we absolutely **must** conduct ourselves with fear throughout the time of our exile, until that day when the final verdict is rendered, and it’s granted to us to clothe ourselves with white garments – and these white garments will be— the righteous deeds of the saints. And then what will we do? We will give all praise, and blessing, and honor, and glory to God **alone** – forever and ever and ever!