

BE HOLY NOT RELIGIOUS

Today's Text: 1 Peter 1: 3-25

Extracts:

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; *as obedient children, not conforming yourselves to the former lusts, as in your ignorance; but as He who called you is holy, you also be holy in all your conduct, because it is written, "Be holy, for I am holy"* [1 Pet. 1: 13-16].

Cardinal Theodore McCarrick, 88, was the former Catholic Archbishop of Washington DC and Newark, NJ, in USA.¹ He was one of the most sought-after fund raisers and commencement speakers and gained honorary degrees from prominent Catholic universities. He retired in 2006 at the age of 75. However, he was accused of sexually abusing children (altar boys) decades ago as well as coercing adult seminarians to sleep with him nearly fifty years ago in New York. Following investigations, Pope Francis recently defrocked him. He can no longer celebrate Mass or other sacraments.

The cardinal's misconduct occurred from when he was under 40 years of age but it has come to haunt him in his eighties. Efforts by family, friends and the church to cover him up over the years finally failed. The only reason he did not go to jail was because of statute limitation- the offence was committed more than 50 years ago. We all cannot be that lucky! Many believers put up an outward show of piety and "holiness" because that is what others see and commend. But can they deceive God? Are you holy or simply religious?

In today's Bible text, the Apostle Peter enjoins us that, as obedient servants, we should not conform to our former lusts but, as we have been called to be holy, we should also be holy in our conduct. How can we remain holy just as our God is holy? Let us find out in today's study.

¹ Based on Matthew Vann and Linda Givelash, "Former US cardinal Theodore McCarrick defrocked by Pope Francis on sexual misconduct allegations," Updated Feb. 16, 2019; <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/world/cardinal-theodore-mccarrick-dismissed-vatican-sex-abuse-scandal-n972391>

1. Background: Where can you hide from God?

Many believers obey the (non-existent) “Eleventh Commandment,” which is, “Thou shall not be caught!” That makes most of us pretenders: we do dirty things in secret while we present a public image of spirituality and piety. We cheat in marriage, church, politics, business and work and do everything to cover up our dirty tracks. But can we really hide from others, not to talk of God? God is Spirit and those who worship Him must do so in spirit and in truth [**Jn 4:24**].

According to behavioural scientists, we present four different types of selves to others.² In the *public self*, what we know about ourselves is what others also know about us. It is there we impress others with how big or important we are. That is hypocrisy which Jesus condemned in the scribes and pharisees [**Matt. 23: 1-7,28**]. For example, in the Parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector, they both came to the temple to pray. Hear what the Pharisee said, “God, I thank You that I am not like other men-extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even as the tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I possess” [**Lk 18: 9-14**]. That was supposed to be a prayer? He placed emphasis on his religious practices.

There is the *blind self*- everybody knows it about us but we do not. For example, bad breath. There are many wrong or embarrassing things we do before others without our realizing it. Our mannerisms, such as our way of speaking, how we drive bargains during negotiations, how we monopolize discussions, our perfumes, and all those things that we do wind up irritating others or how they see us. Unfortunately, we cannot know we are offending them unless they tell us. If we cannot impress others here, how can we impress God?

Many of us have so much to hide through our *confidential self*. We do not pay our tithes as and when due. We may be tampering with our employers’ records or accounts for our own self-enrichment. For as long as we can keep it a secret, or until there are leaks, our public image remains intact. Take the example of David’s adulterous relationship with Bathsheba which resulted in an unwanted pregnancy. He got her husband killed in battle and he married her. David might have got away with it if God had not revealed the matter to Prophet Nathan. In God’s words to King David, “You did it secretly, but I will [punish] you before all Israel, before the sun” [**2 Sam. 12: 1-12**].

Finally, there are certain things about us that neither we nor others may ever know about us. Such secrets are buried in our *unknown self*. Only God knows such things about us. The Psalmist writes, “Where can I go from Your Spirit? Or where can I flee from Your presence? If I ascend into heaven, You are there; if I make my bed in hell, behold, You are there” [**Ps. 139: 7-8**]. Therefore, even if we confess our known sins, it is not enough to think that is all there is. That is why

² <http://www.markedbyteachers.com/university-degree/business-and-administrative-studies/johari-s-window-is-based-on-the-principle-that-of-all-the-things-about-us-that-exist-can-be-found-through-positive-and-honest-information-the-theory-consists-of-four-windowpanes.html>

the Psalmist prays to God, “Who can understand his errors? Cleanse me from secret faults” [Ps. 19:12].

From the forgoing, we see that only God knows our true self because the “LORD does not see as man sees; for man looks at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart” [1 Sam. 16: 7]. Religion, that is, following the rituals of our churches where we worship, may help with our outward appearance. However, since the end of our faith is the salvation of our souls [1 Pet. 1: 9], *we must pay more attention to holiness, that is, being perfect in goodness and righteousness from God’s perspective*, the theme of the first chapter of Peter’s epistle that we shall study today.

2. Therefore, be holy as God is holy

In the wilderness on their way to the Promised Land, God told the children of Israel, “Be holy, for I am holy” [Lev. 11: 44-45]. Peter reminded his readers to also pay attention to holiness if they want to profit from relating to God. To promote and enhance our holiness before God, he enjoins us to pay attention to the following:

1) *Salvation of your soul is the end of your faith*

Peter writes, “the genuineness of your faith, being much more precious than gold that perishes... may be found to praise, honour, and glory at the revelation of Jesus Christ... receiving the end of your faith-the salvation of your souls” [1 Pet. 1: 7-9]. That means that you should focus on that which will please God, on that which will guide you to eternity in heaven.

What is faith? We are told that without it we cannot please God. It is “the *substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen*” [Heb. 11: 1,6]. Unless God shows us in advance what to expect (in prophesy, dream or vision, for example) we cannot know what to hope for; we cannot see the evidence. Therefore, unless and until you learn to walk by genuine faith, you are not yet on the path of holiness- from God’s perspective.

2) *Walk in full obedience*

Peter adds, “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; as obedient children, not conforming yourselves to the former lusts, as in your ignorance; but as He who called you is holy; you also be holy in your conduct” [1 Pet. 1:13-15].

An obedient person operates by the “*hidden person of the heart, with the incorruptible beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit, which is very precious in the sight of God*” [1Pet. 3:4]. When God was describing Job to Satan, He

said, “Have you seen My servant Job, that there is none like him on the earth, a blameless and upright man, one who fears God and shuns evil?” **[Job 1: 8]**.

Take the example of King Saul who disobeyed God’s instructions to destroy the people of Amalek and their goods, God sent the prophet Samuel to tell him, “Has the LORD as great delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices, as in obeying the voice of the LORD? Behold, to obey is better than sacrifice... for rebellion is as the sin of witchcraft; and stubbornness is as iniquity and idolatry” **[1 Sam. 15:10-23]**. In other words, God is not impressed by religion but holiness.

From the forgoing, it is clear that obedience is at the heart of holiness. When you do only what pleases God, He sees you as one of His beloved.

3. Obedience is better than sacrifice

The following hints are helpful:

1) *Renew your mind*

Peter writes, “Therefore, gird up the loins of your mind” **[1 Pet. 1: 13]**. Paul adds, “Do not be conformed to this world but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what is that good and acceptable and perfect will of God” **[Rom. 12: 2]**. In practice, that means that we have accepted to walk in the light of God and confess our sins if and whenever we offend Him **[1 Jn 1: 6-7]**. There will be temptations but your mind will always be ready to shut them out. Be sober and vigilant because Satan is always walking about like a roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour. With your renewed mind, you can resist him **[1 Pet. 5: 8-9]**. The battle is both continuous (non-stop) and continual (in battles)!

2) *Rest your hope fully upon Jesus*

You must always look up to Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith **[Heb. 12: 2]**, for without Him, we can do nothing **[Jn 15:5]**. Your priest or pastor can help you but they cannot save you. Therefore, you must rest your faith fully on Jesus. In Him, we may have peace, but in the world, we will have tribulation. In His own words, “be of good cheer. I have overcome the world” **[Jn 16:33]**.

3) *Focus on your final home in heaven*

We are sojourners and pilgrims here on earth **[1 Pet. 2: 11]**. That means that our permanent home is in the next world- heaven or hell. The choice is ours. Jesus has gone to prepare a mansion for us in His father’s house. One day, He will return to take us there, so that we shall be where He is **[Jn 14: 1-3]**. Can

any offer be more attractive than that? Is that not worth striving for? In His words, “Not everyone who says to Me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father in heaven. Many will say to Me on that day, ‘Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in Your name, cast out demons in Your name, and done many wonders in Your name?’ And then I will declare to them, ‘I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practise lawlessness!’” [Matt. 7:21-23].

In sum, religion will not take us to heaven. Only holiness does.

3. **Conclusion: The best place to hide is in the open!**

We may have gone far with religion to a large extent, but not for too much longer because sooner than later, our sin will find us out [Num. 32: 23]. Let us stop running into the dark corners of fear, doubts, self-deceit and sin. Instead, let us hide in the open space of love, faith, and reliance on God and His grace to overcome sin. Then, Satan and his wicked forces will look for us and fail because you cannot set a trap for a bird that is watching you! [Prov. 1:17] Let us set our minds on “things above, not on things on earth for you are dead, and your life is hidden with Christ in God” [Col. 3:2- 3].

Be holy, not religious.