

NO LONGER LUKEWARM

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Real Christianity is a visible faith. It's a partnership with Jesus Christ, in which His intent to forgive and save us is matched by our intent to trust and follow Him. His intent is the strategy, the plan; ours is the dependent response.

To sum up what I shared with you two weeks ago, our Christianity, our faith practice, must be intentional. If it is accidental or haphazard it will not be pleasing to God, and it will not be fruitful for us.

In the beginning of his first letter, Apostle Peter outlined for us what a "visible faith" looks like:

¹ Peter 1:13 So prepare your minds for action and exercise self-control. Put all your hope in the gracious salvation that will come to you when Jesus Christ is revealed to the world. ¹⁴ So you must live as God's obedient children. Don't slip back into your old ways of living to satisfy your own desires. You didn't know any better then. ¹⁵ But now you must be holy in everything you do, just as God who chose you is holy. ¹⁶ For the Scriptures say, "You must be holy because I am holy."

¹⁷ And remember that the heavenly Father to whom you pray has no favorites. He will judge or reward you according to what you do.

Two weeks ago, we looked at the first two elements of his prescription in verse 13:

Prepare your minds for action and exercise self-control.

These are mental exercises. They are not strictly intellectual, but they do involve your will, your choice.

God has given humankind free will – the ability and privilege to choose for ourselves how we will live our lives. Generally, and from the beginning, this freedom has been used to choose ways that please us, even if they displease our Maker. In other words, we have squandered God's gift on ourselves and slapped Him in the face with it. "Leave me alone! I can do what I want."

To make the choice to honor God and "exercise self-control" is not natural. It is not in accord with fallen human nature. *It is actually supernatural.* It is a work of God in a person's life. It is the first supernatural experience you will ever have.

And that choice is an inner decision that launches corresponding actions, and those actions require self-control. Self-control, the Bible informs us, is a "fruit of the Spirit," the result of the Holy Spirit's activity in your life. Thus, it is a supernatural experience. The first one any of us have.

Have you made that choice? Have you chosen to honor the Lord Jesus Christ by the way you conduct your life? If so, then right now, thank God that He opened your eyes and moved your heart in that direction. Thank Him out loud!

Why would anyone make such a choice in the face of so many opportunities to please ourselves in various ways?

Peter said that the primary impetus of those self-controlled actions is a growing hope that Jesus will make good on His promise to return for you personally and save you from this world's lostness and misery. The

more you consider His promise to come again to complete His rescue – not to abandon you – the more you will apply self-control to your activities. Why? Because you want to be here when He comes for you.

Having charged us with the moral responsibility to live a self-controlled life, Peter begins to explain what that looks like.

God's Obedient Children

1 Peter 1:14 So you must live as God's obedient children. Don't slip back into your old ways of living to satisfy your own desires. You didn't know any better then.

Self-control looks like obedience to our Heavenly Father. It is the childlike trust that Father knows best. He *knows* more than we do, He *sees* more than we do, He's *wiser* than we are, and He *loves* us deeply. Therefore, His directives are better than our natural inclinations.

When you pray, do you ever find yourself trying to persuade God that the path you would *like* to take is really the *best* one available, like you used to try to persuade your dad or mom what was good for you? When you were young, did you argue things like: "Sugar doesn't affect me!" "I don't need as much sleep as you do!" "I don't need lessons, I know how to drive!" "C'mon, everybody's doing it!"

Were your parents impressed? Probably God isn't either.

1 Peter 1:14 Don't slip back into your old ways of living to satisfy your own desires.

This is about making a change that lasts, and the danger of "*slipping back into your old ways.*" We all have them, you know – old ways. Our old ways of doing things.

When Martha and I had been married about three years, and had two young children, I got a serious wake-up call. I had done something to hurt her feelings and threaten her trust in me, and now she wasn't speaking to me. But the last thing she did say included the word "divorce," so she got my attention.

In no small amount of desperation, I set aside a day to fast and pray about the situation. I spent the first several hours trying to persuade God that Martha needed a change of heart, and perhaps He had led me astray to take her as my wife, for what Christian would even *think* seriously about divorce. (You know the excuse: "That woman You gave me...") In case you're wondering, God was uncomfortably silent during my rant.

Having exhausted my arguments about Martha's spiritual immaturity, I turned to a less appealing subject: the possible error of my ways. And then I heard God's voice. It was clear and authoritative. He said, "Son, you're not single anymore. You're a family." I asked Him to explain what that even meant. He replied, "You're a family now. You can no longer think like a single man. You can no longer pray like a single man. And you can no longer make decisions like a single man. You're a family. As you live before Me, you represent your *whole family*, not just yourself."

He rocked my world that day, and began to reorient my thinking and my actions. I didn't know any better before, but now I did. So, no more of the old ways – the familiar ways, the easy ways, the self-centered ways. I embraced self-control and began to live as God's obedient son.

(I emphasize "began," because that was not the only talking-to that I've had from God, and that was not the only "old way" that needed transformation. But enough about me. Let's talk about you!)

Self-controlled actions look like dropping your high-minded resistance, and repenting of your stubborn pride and self-will – they look like intentional obedience to our Heavenly Father.

Holy Conduct

^{1 Peter 1:15} *But now you must be holy in everything you do, just as God who chose you is holy.* ¹⁶ *For the Scriptures say, “You must be holy because I am holy.”*

Obedience to God means breaking with every known sin. When the Holy Spirit reveals something you have done as sinful, your appropriate response does not include excuses or blaming others. The only appropriate response is remorse and repentance. That means sorrow for offending Him and a change of heart and mind toward the offensive behavior.

What I once loved I now hate. What I once hated I now love. God makes those kinds of changes in our lives!

God is holy, so we must be holy. Intentionally holy in all of our conduct. Like Father, like children. Holy, like Jesus.

Imagine you're in a small boat in the middle of the lake. The day is perfect – not too hot, and no wind at all. There are no ripples on the water. Not a stirring. It looks like a pane of glass below you. Completely calm. Totally placid.

So you jump in and swim for a while. But when you return to the exact spot where you left the boat, you find that it has moved. How can that be?

There's no wind. There are no waves. The water appears undisturbed, yet the boat has moved. It has *drifted*.

Even though the surface of the water looks still, below the surface there are currents. They might appear slight, but they're there. And so, the boat will always drift.

Our hearts are like that. Everything might look calm on the surface. We might not be facing a major crisis; might not be under undue amounts of stress; might be secure in our health and career; might not have any pressing doubts or questions about God and His work in the world. And yet there is always an undercurrent of sin in our hearts. As a result, if we don't take intentional action to prevent it, we will always drift. The drift is often slow, perhaps barely noticeable. But it happens.

Lack of Intentionality

That's actually true in all areas of life. Without intentionality, drifting is bound to happen.

You might mean to cut down on your spending this year, but without intentionality, you are going to drift from that vision.

You might want to eat less sugar this year, but unless you pay attention, you will drift from your goals.

You might intend to read more and watch TV less, but unless you take active measures to do so you will drift.

When you do nothing, you drift, and you drift despite all your good intentions, grandiose claims, or resolute statements. You are always going to drift. And you know what else?

No one drifts towards Jesus. No one drifts toward holiness.

Pay Even More Attention

No one ever did nothing and woke up closer to Jesus the next day than they were before. We drift *away* from Him; not toward Him. If we want to move toward Jesus, then it's going to take an intentional, active stance against the inner current of sin that would otherwise move us further and further from Him.

So, the writer of Hebrews tells us to do something very simple and yet profound:

"We must, therefore, pay even more attention to what we have heard, so that we will not drift away..." (Hebrews 2:1)

Pay attention, because if you're not intentional (paying active attention), you are going to drift. And if you drift, it's always going to be away from Jesus, not toward Him.

The Process of Sinning

This dynamic is at play in the first Psalm:

Psalm 1:1 How happy is the one who does not walk in the advice of the wicked or stand in the pathway with sinners or sit in the company of mockers!

Do you see the progression described here?

The person described here did not intend to keep company with the wrong crowd. At least not at first. At first, it was just advice shared in a conversation that led to a decision. They were just walking along.

But then the walk turned stationary and the person stopped and stood still in the wrong path. He was a little further along in his drift from righteousness.

Eventually, this person became comfortable with sin and sat down right in the midst of it. They walked, then stood still, then just sat down.

This is the creep of sin, and the way we drift into it. Sin starts small – just a little compromise. But it never stays that way. We follow a nudge and walk with it, then we embrace an invitation and stand with it, then it becomes our own outlook and we sit down right in the middle of it.

And the most frightening part is that we never really intended to. It just sort of happened. We drifted into this place.

You can drift into sin, unless you intentionally anchor yourself. Unless you're willing to take action against it, you will always experience this process – walking, standing, then eventually sitting in the middle of it.

But while you can drift into sin, you can't drift into holiness.

The same Psalm calls the man who does not drift "blessed," because he does something different, something intentional. Instead of drifting along – walking, then standing, then sitting – he sets his anchor:

Psalm 1:2 Instead, his delight is in the Lord's instruction, and he meditates on it day and night.

No drift here. Here is an intentional commitment to God's Word. Here is a choice to read it, to learn it, and to think on it again and again. Drift is complacent and mindless; but Bible meditation is active and intentional.

Can you recognize your own tendency to drift? Do you realize that if you do nothing, you will always drift toward sin. Instead, let's be active and anchor ourselves to that which is strong enough to keep us from drifting – the unchanging Word of God.

You can drift into sin, but not into holiness.

Divine Accountability

1 Peter 1:17 And remember that the heavenly Father to whom you pray has no favorites. He will judge or reward you according to what you do.

Intentionality always recognizes accountability. No accountability, no intentionality.

Some people think that God speaks about rewards in the Bible in order to incentivize us, to get us to perform like well-trained dogs. No, that's not the relationship that God wants with you, and a relationship like that would not have required the substitutionary death of Jesus.

God promises rewards in order to establish accountability, because without accountability there will be no intentionality. And without intentionality, there is only drifting. And that never ends well.

Each one of us will stand – naked and on our own – before the Judgment Seat of Christ. Will you hear Him say, "Well done!"? Will there be rewards?

Not by accident.

Casual Christianity is lukewarm Christianity – the kind that Jesus rejects. Don't drift there. Don't be another statistic of lukewarm Christianity.

Acknowledge that you are accountable to the One who made you, the One who redeemed you. And let your accountability prepare your mind for action and the exercise of self-control. Become obedient to God, setting a new course for your new life, and turning all your conduct into holiness to the Lord.

This is the real life! This is the real faith!