

Be careful what you ask for!
1 Peter 1:13-16

I am enjoying our chapel theme for this year very much. Here am I, Lord....purify me. Let's say it together: "Here am I, Lord....purify me."

I have especially enjoyed the way that a lot of the speakers this year have preached on this passage. I think that we have gained some very valuable insight into the life of purity and holiness. Indeed, I think that Christ would want all of us to pray the prayer of our theme, "Here am I, Lord. Purify me."

But I can't help but wonder sometimes if we really know what we are asking the Lord to do for us when we pray this prayer. I'm sure that all of us have heard the saying, "Be careful what you ask for." Do we really know what we are asking for when we ask the Lord to purify us?

We really do need to be careful what we ask for! I am reminded of a story that Professor Joe Warrington told me some time ago.

A man who just died is delivered to the mortuary wearing an expensive, expertly tailored black suit. The mortician asks the deceased's wife how she would like the body dressed for the funeral. He points out that the man does look very good in the black suit he is already wearing. The widow, however, says that she always thought her husband looked his best in blue, and so she wants him to be dressed in a blue suit

for the funeral. Then she gives the mortician a blank check and says, "I don't care what it costs, please have my husband in a blue suit for the viewing."

The next day, the woman returns for the wake. To her delight, she finds her husband dressed in a gorgeous blue suit with a subtle chalk stripe; the suit fits him perfectly.

She says to the mortician, "Whatever this cost, I'm very satisfied. You did an excellent job and I'm very grateful. How much did you spend?"

To her astonishment, the mortician presents her with the blank check. "There's no charge," he says.

"No, really, I must compensate you for the cost of that exquisite blue suit!" she insists.

"Honestly, ma'am," the mortician says, "It cost nothing. You see, another deceased gentleman of about your husband's size was brought in shortly after you left yesterday, and he was wearing an attractive blue suit. I asked his wife if she minded him going to his grave wearing a black suit instead of the blue suit, and she said it made no difference as long as he looked nice....

And so I just switched.....the heads."

You see, we have to be careful what we ask for!

So what about this theme or this prayer we have been following this year? Here am I, Lord. Purify me. Do you want to say it with me? “Here am I, Lord.....” Wait!! (try to interrupt them from saying “purify me”).

If you ask God to purify you, do you really know what you are asking? Have you ever really sat down and thought about what might happen if God would answer this prayer for you tonight?

Now, please don't misunderstand me here. I am not trying to discourage you from asking God to purify you. I'm just wondering if you have thought about what it means.

Purification strikes me as a somewhat funny concept. When most of us think about purification, I am convinced we tend to think of something beautiful, unblemished, and valuable, something refreshing, clean, and useful. And that's certainly true. But how many of us think about the process that leads to purification?

As I was thinking about this, I looked up some of the methods of purification in chemistry. Some of these methods sound rather frightening. For instance, there is purification by filtration, which means that impurities are squeezed through some kind of porous material until they are completely strained out. Or there is purification by smelting, refining, or distillation, which means that a substance is heated to the point of melting, separation or boiling so that impurities are destroyed. There is purification by electrolysis that removes impurities by running them through an electric current. In other words, you shock the impurities to death! Maybe the one

that scares me the most is called purification by fractionation. This purification strategy uses one of these other methods that might not be so efficient in extracting all the impurities from the material you are trying to purify. But since it is not so efficient, fractionation calls for the purification activity to be repeated again and again and again. So this means that you strain the impurity again or heat it again or shock that impurity again.....and again and again.

Are you sure you want God to do this to you? Here am I, Lord. Purify me?

Wait! Don't say it. Be careful what you ask for!

But maybe purification in spiritual matters is different than purification in chemistry. Well, in some ways it just HAS to be different, right? What does the Bible tell us?

I am reminded immediately of Isaiah 6:1-8, the passage from which our theme is derived. You remember the passage. Isaiah sees a vision of God high and exalted on his throne with the angels flying around him and calling, "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God Almighty." You will also certainly remember Isaiah's response, "Woe to me, for I am a man of unclean lips living among a people of unclean lips." Notice what the seraph angel does to "purify" Isaiah of his unclean lips. He takes a live coal from the sacrifice on the altar, and he touches Isaiah's lips with the burning coal. Now, I don't know if we would classify this as a purification of melting, separation or boiling, but either way, it sounds painful!

Here am I, Lord. Purify me. Stop! Wait! Don't say it! Be careful what you ask for!

But maybe Isaiah's purification in the Bible is an exceptional case. Maybe other examples of purification in the Bible are different.

This brings us to the passage we read from 1 Peter.

In verse 15 of 1 Peter chapter 1, Peter calls to his readers to "be holy in all you do; for it is written, 'Be holy, because I am holy.'" From what we have seen in Isaiah, it would seem that this kind of holiness Peter is talking about includes purification. And as we look further into what Peter writes, we can actually see that this is the case. Look at verse 22. After calling his readers to be holy in verse 15, Peter goes on to write, "now that you have purified yourselves by obeying the truth". Obviously, holiness and purification go hand in hand.

But does this purification have to be painful? Well, maybe not, but if you are afraid of some pain and effort, the letter of 1 Peter is NOT going to be the place to run and hide from it! You see, First Peter is written to people who were familiar with suffering. And their suffering was not caused by doing something foolish, reckless, or illegal. No, they were suffering because they were Christians. They were suffering because they identified themselves with Christ. In chapter 4 verse 12, Peter writes, "Dear friends, do not be surprised at the painful trial you are suffering, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice that you participate in the sufferings of Christ."

Too often we seem to want to shy away from any discussion or possibility of pain as believers. In this regard, Floyd Filson wrote in an article, “We often tend to regard Christ’s sufferings as the means by which we escape suffering. He suffered for us, so we will not have to suffer. This idea does not come from the NT church” (see page 36 in commentary). Throughout the NT, we find believers suffering for their faith. While Peter does not teach that suffering is inevitable, he does teach that every believer must be ready to face it. And he teaches in 1:7 that this suffering for the sake of Christ can even work to purify the believer’s faith just like gold is refined and purified by fire.

So how about you? If it is necessary, are you ready and willing to suffer in order to allow God to purify you? Here am I, Lord. Purify me! Be careful what you ask for!

As I mentioned before, I am convinced that most of us think of purification as something that is clean and sweet and easy. And so when we pray to God, “Here am I, Lord. Purify me,” we think we can just open up our arms to God, and wait for him to bless us in a nice, comfortable, and easy way. (**Note:** raise arms, close eyes and say: “Okay, God. Go ahead and purify me. I’m ready to receive your blessing”). But I don’t think it happens in this way.

We have to look at what Peter says in these verses of chapter 1 that we have read tonight. Peter was writing to people who were already suffering for their faith in one way or another. Some of them were being insulted and verbally abused, some were being ostracized from the community in which they lived, some were facing

beatings and physical harm, some of them were even facing the risk of death for their faith in Jesus Christ.

When I consider a group of believers who were going through so much for their faith—I mean, they were truly suffering for the sake of Christ!—I can imagine that Peter could write, “My brothers and sisters, great job! You are doing it! Just hang in there and you’ll be fine.” But that’s not what Peter writes. Instead he writes, “I know you are struggling. I know you are undergoing suffering for the sake of Christ and for the sake of your faith. But just as he who called you is holy, so be holy in all you do.”

Haven’t these people done enough already? Haven’t they gone through enough already?

Why can’t they just sit back now and let God purify them? Well, according to Peter, it just doesn’t work that way!

What I find so interesting in this passage is to see that Peter doesn’t just call them to be purified and holy in verse 15. But he instructs them how to get ready for this in verses 13 and 14.

Before they can be made holy, Peter tells them to “prepare your minds for action.” Literally, this Greek phrase means “gird the loins of your mind.” Well that’s a funny sounding phrase, don’t you think? When’s the last time someone told you to “gird the loans of your mind”? What in the world does that mean? The phrase might sound funny, but the imagery here is very poignant. In Biblical times, the men used to

wear long and flowing robes over a tighter fitting tunic for their clothing. When quick action or fast running was needed, the robes would often get in their way and cause them to stumble or get tied up in the long flowing cloth. And so they would free up their arms and legs by tucking the front of the robe into their belt. This was called “girding the loins.” For us today, we would probably use the expression “roll up your sleeves” or “tighten your belt” or “pull up your pants” to express the same kind of preparation for action. The reference to the mind magnifies the metaphorical use of this phrase. In other words, Peter tells his readers to get themselves ready for some very serious thought. Get ready for it! Think about it! Get yourself in the right frame of mind! In other words, be careful what you ask for!

Then Peter tells them in verse 13 to “be self-controlled.” The form of this word means that they should have an ongoing or continuing attitude of levelheadedness. Be sober in your thinking. Be rational in your thoughts. Later in this letter, Peter will use this same word to call his readers to spiritual alertness for praying and for resisting the devil. So you want to be purified and made holy? Then prepare yourself by exercising self-control, being fully alert and ready to do whatever it takes. Peter tells his readers to get themselves ready for *whatever* it takes *as long as* it takes.

Then in verse 14, Peter tells them, “Do not conform to the evil desires you had when you lived in ignorance.” In other words, if you want God to purify you and make you holy, you can’t just continue down the same old path of sin and think everything is going to be all right. Being made holy is not the same thing as salvation.

Your relationship with God is different. You have turned away from the ignorance of thinking that life is all about yourself. You have turned away from the ignorance of thinking that true life is composed of satisfying your own wants and your own desires. The verb “do not conform” is only used twice in the New Testament. It is used here by Peter and it is used by Paul in Romans 12:2 where Paul tells his readers not to conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but to be transformed by the renewing of your mind. In both instances, believers are called to reorient their lives to conform to the will of God and not to their own desires or the expectations of people around them.

Do you see what is happening here? Purification or holiness is not some kind of passive activity. It is not something that happens while we just thoughtlessly go about the business of life. “Okay, God. Go ahead and purify me, but make it quick, will you?” This is not what Peter is talking about. Rather, Peter calls us to make ourselves ready for this gift of God. He wants us to think about it seriously, to prepare our minds, to prepare our will to conform to the will of God. We need to surrender our thoughts, our actions, our motivations, our desires fully to God.

Are you really ready for God to purify you? Have you prepared yourself to receive this gift of grace? Are you ready to surrender yourself fully to God and his will? I am not talking about works-righteousness here, but Peter does tell us that there is work involved. We have to prepare ourselves, making ourselves mentally, and

physically, and spiritually ready to receive his gift. Here am I, Lord. Purify me. Be careful what you ask for. Are you ready to do whatever it takes?

I remember hearing my Grandfather tell about the day when the Lord purified his heart and life completely. My grandpa Becker had been a Christian believer for quite some time. He was serving the Lord, reading the Bible, going to church, witnessing to others about his faith. But there was something missing. He said that it was as if his life wasn't completely whole. There wasn't the joy, there wasn't the victory in his life, that he knew God could give him. Deep inside himself, he said there was this aching desire to surrender himself completely to God.

An evangelist came to the Nazarene church my grandpa and grandma were attending, and every night he preached about full surrender to God and the victorious life that a believer could experience through being purified or sanctified through God's Holy Spirit. Early in the week of those special services, both of my grandparents went forward and prayed for God's infilling and purifying power. My grandmother received the infilling of God's Holy Spirit first, but my grandfather continued to struggle. Every night he went to the altar and asked God to purify him and to fill his life completely, but it didn't happen. I'm not sure which day of the week it was, but my grandpa told me that he wanted God to purify him so much that he felt almost desperate. In those days my grandfather was farming, and he had to spend an entire day plowing a field to prepare it for sowing. As he left the house that day, he told me he asked his wife to pray for him to be able to fully surrender himself

to God's purifying and sanctifying power. Then he went out to the field and climbed up onto the tractor to plow the field. My grandma said that she spent the entire day praying for my grandpa. She could see him out in the field that entire time, driving back and forth as he plowed the field for sowing. But she said it was the strangest thing. At the end of each run of the field, she could see the tractor turn around, but then the tractor would stop for a couple of minutes before it began its next plowing course through the field. She didn't understand why the tractor kept stopping, but she felt a burden for my grandfather, and she continued to pray for him all through that day. Finally, the constant stopping of the tractor at the end of each row of plowing made my grandmother so curious that she walked out towards the field to see what was going on. At the end of each row, my grandma said she could see my grandpa climb out of the tractor and kneel down in the newly plowed dirt, and bow his head and pray. You see, my grandfather was so desperate for God to purify his life that he couldn't just go about the "normal business" of the day. And so he stopped and asked God to purify him. And he plowed another row and stopped and asked God to purify him. And he kept on doing this all day long until his mind, and his heart, and his spirit, and his will were finally completely surrendered to God. My grandpa knew what he was asking for, and he was willing to pay the price to make it happen. And God purified him!

In the midst of our busy and hectic lives, I am afraid that some of us think we want God to purify us, but we don't want to take the time and effort to surrender

ourselves completely to Him. But it doesn't work that way. Haven't you wondered why our theme throughout this entire trimester is focused on purity? It is easy to say, "Lord, here am I. Purify me!" But sometimes it takes us time to prepare our hearts and lives and mind to receive God's gift. We have to remember that purity and holiness are indeed God's gifts. And he will only purify us when he sees and he knows we are ready! Our chaplain knows this, and that is why we keep praying the same prayer for 11 weeks. Here am I, Lord. Purify me! Prepare my heart, prepare my mind, prepare my will. Take my life and prepare me, Lord! Purify me!

You have to understand: God *wants* to purify our lives. He *wants* to give us victory and he *wants* to give us the joy and the peace of his full presence. But we have to surrender ourselves. We have to prepare our minds and hearts for serious action. We have to turn away from our own selfish desires and will. We have to be ready to pay the price. And then we can pray, "Here am I, Lord. Purify me."

I wish I had the time to tell you about the joy and the peace that comes with God's purifying presence. I wish I had the time to talk about the spiritual victory that you can experience through the infilling of God's sanctifying Spirit.

But the real question we have to ask ourselves tonight is whether we are truly willing for God to purify us. Are you willing to pay the price of full surrender? Are you desperate enough for God's infilling and purifying presence to climb down off the tractor and to surrender everything to him? Are you ready to have God take your life completely, no reservations, no exceptions?

What would happen if God wanted to purify you tonight? Are you ready? Are you willing? Have you surrendered your life totally to him?

Here am I, Lord. Purify me!

In a moment we are going to sing a song of response to God. But I'm wondering if some of you are willing and ready to receive God's purification.