For or As?

"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.'" (1 Peter 1:15–16, ESV).

One small word can make an enormous theological difference.

For years, this verse has sometimes been quoted, "Be holy, as I am holy." It sounds biblical. It even sounds reasonable. But that is not what Peter wrote, and it is not what God said in Leviticus. The word is not "as." It is "for."

"You shall be holy, for I am holy." (1 Peter 1:16, ESV).

"As" can easily turn the statement into a comparison. God is holy, and therefore the Christian must somehow attain a holiness comparable to His. The eyes immediately turn toward human performance. How holy am I? What must I do to become holier? How does my conduct compare with that of other Christians?

But "for" points in another direction entirely. It gives the reason for the command. God's people are to be holy because the God to whom they belong is holy.

Peter has already made that clear. Before commanding holiness, he writes, *"set your hope fully on the grace that will be brought to you at the revelation of Jesus Christ."* (1 Peter 1:13, ESV).

Grace comes before the command.

The same order appears in Leviticus. Israel did not become God's people by demonstrating sufficient holiness. God redeemed them from Egypt, claimed them as His own, and then commanded them to live as the people who belonged to Him. Their holiness was never the purchase price of redemption.

Yet it is remarkably easy to reverse that order.

Holiness can become a system of measurements. Certain behaviors become badges of spirituality. Particular customs, clothing, entertainments, foods, beverages, or associations become the visible evidence by which holiness is judged. Eventually the question is no longer simply whether one is obeying God. It becomes whether one is meeting the expectations of the group.

And comparison almost inevitably follows.

Jesus described a Pharisee who prayed, *"God, I thank you that I am not like other men."* (Luke 18:11, ESV). He fasted. He tithed. He could point to genuine religious behavior. His problem was not that fasting or tithing were wrong. His problem was that his performance had become a reason to look at another man and find himself superior.

That is the aroma of legalism: obedience accompanied by pride.

Legalistic holiness looks sideways. It searches for someone whose conduct appears less acceptable and discovers reassurance in the comparison. Biblical holiness looks upward. Its reference point is not the person in the next pew but the God whose holiness is absolute. Looking sideways can produce pride. Looking upward leaves no room for it.

When Isaiah saw the Lord high and lifted up and heard the seraphim cry, *"Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts,"* his response was not satisfaction with his own spiritual accomplishments. He cried, *"Woe is me! For I am lost."* (Isaiah 6:3, 5, ESV).

The clearer our view of God's holiness becomes, the less inclined we should be to congratulate ourselves.

The difference between "for" and "as" may appear insignificant, but the distinction guards something precious.

God does not command His creatures to become God. Neither does He invite His redeemed people into a competition to determine who appears most holy. He calls those who belong to Him to conduct themselves according to the character of the One who has called them.

The standard remains infinitely high. The obligation remains real. But the foundation is grace, not performance.

God is holy.

His people belong to Him.

Therefore, they are to be holy.

Not "as."

"For."

Just a thought.

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