

Holiness

2 Peter 3:8-15a

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Pick your sport. Different professional athletes across the map have shown just how fast one can rise in talent, money, and fame, and how equally fast one can fall to the ravages of pride, injury, and poor decision. Few have fallen further and faster than Mickey Mantle, the New York Yankees' great—often dubbed the best homerun switch hitter ever—who retired in 1969. Mantle enjoyed the glory years of the Yankees through their repeated World Series appearances. But regret, not glory, marked the downward spiral of his personal life once he retired from Major League Baseball at the age of 33.

Mantle's drinking and womanizing did a number on his family, not to mention his own well-being. He disappeared into the dark life of alcoholism during the 1980s, losing much of his purpose and meaning in life and describing it to friends as his own internal hell. When he finally entered Baylor Medical Center for a liver transplant in June 1995, doctors gave him just days to live if he didn't have the transplant.

A few weeks after his surgery, Mantle walked into a standing-room-only press conference at the hospital. It would prove to be his last public statement. Sadness and regret marked his words as he described the life he had squandered: "God gave me a great body and an ability to play baseball," he said. "God gave me everything, and I just ... pffft! ... I'd like to say to the kids out there, if you're looking for a role model, this is a role model: don't be like me."

When a reporter asked Mantle if he had signed a donor card, he said, "Everything I've got is worn out.... Although I've heard people say they'd like to have my heart, it's never been used."¹

At the same press conference he spoke of his selfishness: "I want to start giving back," he told those gathered, "[because] all I've ever done is take."² It turns out that that giving back wasn't going to happen. Four weeks after speaking to the press, Mantle was dead from anemia, infection, and quite possibly a broken heart.

It's no fun to draw inspiration from someone else's glaring disappointments. But Mantle's self-destructive behavior and loss of meaning provide a wake-up call for anybody trying to give faithful shape to his or her life. If we want our life to add up to any measure of selfless significance, what will it take to arrive at such a point before it's too late?

Many biblical scholars believe that The Second Letter of Peter is really a kind of last will and testament from the author. As Peter saw his own life drawing to a close, and sensed that he might not get another chance to address his friends, he communicated some final thoughts. He spoke with earnestness and seriousness, hoping others would take his convictions to heart. "The day of the Lord will come like a thief, and then the heavens will pass away with a loud noise, and all the elements will be dissolved with fire.... [And] since everything will be dissolved in this way, what sort of persons do you want to be in leading lives of holiness and godliness?"³

In other words, what would your lives look like if the Lord showed up unan-

nounced? In anticipation of that moment, what sort of persons do you want to be? Would there be any obvious evidence of holiness that others would notice? Peter delivers a vision of the end times. Like others around him, he had a firm expectation of what would happen, and the picture he portrays is one of gigantic meltdown. Everything will be dissolved or eviscerated. We might think of that cataclysmic time as a sudden dissolution of everything we rely on or find valuable. Our cell phone, car keys, favorite chair, World Series ring, local government, bank account, photo albums, books, jewelry, email contact lists, and whatever else comes to mind—they're all cast into oblivion. Every object that contributes to life's pleasure or value would be gone. Melted down. Liquefied.

In such a scenario of sudden evisceration, the central questions for those left standing would be: What exactly would your life look like? Who would you be? Would there even be a "you" worth getting to know, independent of everything to which you clung? The writer of Second Peter suggests these sorts of questions are not peculiar at all, but deeply spiritual in nature. The only way to address them realistically is to imagine a sudden and unexpected turn of events.

The surprise turn of events described in scripture by Peter and others is hard for us to appreciate. As Mickey Mantle seems to have assumed for himself over the decades, most of us figure we'll have more time to make amends, more time to turn over a new leaf, more time to give back to others after living mostly in a taking mood. I, for one, don't know anybody in our faith community who spends his or her days guessing, predicting, or worrying about when the Lord will return. That calculation doesn't figure into my imagination either. Most of us might as well sit in for the poor Jew described in the tale of the small Russian shtetl where the town council paid him one ruble per week. He was paid to sit at the town gate and be the first to greet the Messiah and alert others to the Messiah's arrival. The man's out-of-town brother visited him one day only to be instantly puzzled as to why he took such a low-paying job. "Well, it's true," the poor man said. "The pay is indeed low. But it's the steadiest job in the world."

We've learned not to expect the Lord to show up on our doorstep unannounced. Those of you who know you will be receiving phone calls or text messages tomorrow—because it's a typical day—are not expecting to receive one specifically from the Lord. I'm quite sure of that. In fact, I wonder what sort of panic would set in if you were to receive a text message from the Lord that read, "I'm five minutes away."

After church last week I struck up a conversation with two members of our congregation. These sisters, in their early seventies, had just moved into a new home on the outskirts of a nursing home complex. I said rather casually to them, and with all good intent, "I'll have to drop in on you sometime so you can show me your new digs." With panic in their eyes and almost unison response, they stared at me and said, "Not today! Don't come today!" Well, I wasn't thinking of visiting that day or on any day, for that matter, especially without prior notice. But my words brought a sudden flash of terror upon them as they imagined the condition of their house and the many half-unpacked boxes.

If the Lord were to ring your doorbell today, what would the inside of your house convey to this guest? Would there be order or chaos? Would life inside seem cozy and peaceful or haphazard and disheveled? Or better yet, imagine the situation Peter

describes. If everything inside your house were melted down and mysteriously dissolved, what would be the shape of the relationships in that house? Assuming you have other people living with you, would the character and feel of the household be loving and caring or tense and argumentative? Or if you live by yourself, would the Lord be able to notice obvious signs of gratitude or evidence of an active prayer life? Would your public and private lives appear to this surprise guest as congruent?

“Since all these things will be dissolved in this way, what sort of persons do you want to be in leading lives of holiness and godliness?” Holiness is one of the most beautiful words in the vocabulary of faith. We use it appropriately to describe the interior passion that has us living with and for God. It’s the vitality of the Spirit or the exuberance of God dwelling richly within us in undiluted fashion. We use the word holiness inappropriately if we only mean by it to reduce life to certain behaviors resembling niceness or goodness. A misunderstanding of holiness puts God at our disposal and treats the impact of the divine as cosmetic. We become spectators, living at a safe distance from God, eager to be in charge of our own spirituality.

“Holiness is the most attractive quality, the most intense experience we ever get out of sheer life,” says Eugene Peterson. “We find ourselves in on the operations of God, . . . not talking about them, not reading about them. . . . ‘Our God is consuming fire’ (Heb. 12:29), not fire to be played with. Holy, Holy, Holy is not Christian needle-point.”⁴

The liturgy at Mickey Mantle’s funeral included a song he requested for the day: “Yesterday When I Was Young” by Roy Clark. It’s a country music song that may not be typical funeral fare in many churches. But the words epitomize the disappointment Mantle held for himself and his sense of an unholy existence from which he saw no escape:

I teased at life as if it were a foolish game, the way the evening breeze may tease a candle flame. The thousand dreams I dreamed, the splendid things I planned; I always built to last on weak and shifting sand. . . . I ran so fast that time and youth at last ran out; I never stopped to think what life was all about. . . . There are so many songs in me that won’t be sung. I feel the bitter taste of tears upon my tongue. The time has come for me to pay for yesterday, when I was young.⁵

In his letter about end times and with his encouragement that we live lives of holiness and godliness, Peter has a more hopeful word than this depressing song. Death doesn’t involve our “paying for yesterday” or some “bitter taste of tears upon our tongue.” No, the news is far better. If anything, says Peter, the Lord’s patience with us *is* our salvation. We can wait all we want, which is part of the bargain of living holy and godly lives. But, we shouldn’t miss the Lord’s own patience with us. “The Lord is not slow about his promise, as some think of slowness, but is patient with you, not wanting any to perish, but all to come to repentance.”⁶ What a beautiful hope—one of comfort to everyone who wonders if his or her heart was ever adequately used.

Notes

1 Jane Leavy, *The Last Boy* (HarperCollins, 2010), 374.

2 <https://www.upi.com/Archives/1995/07/11/Mickey-Mantle-says-dont-be-like-me/1810805435200/>.

3 2 Peter 3:10-11.

4 Eugene H. Peterson, *The Jesus Way* (Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2007), 132.

5 <https://www.lyrics.com/lyric/22807510/Shades+of+Country+%5BL%26D+Box%5D/Yesterday+When+I+Was+Young>.

6 2 Peter 3:9.