

What Sort of Persons Ought You to Be?

by John Piper

The sermon emphasizes the importance of living a life of holiness and godliness in light of the coming day of the Lord, which will bring destruction to the world and only expressions of holiness and godliness will survive.

Duration: 35:59

Scripture: Joel 2:30, Zephaniah 1:14

Topics: "Holiness"

Description

In this sermon, Pastor John Piper focuses on the topic of the end of the age and the second coming of Jesus. He emphasizes that the world's skepticism and disbelief in the return of Christ is not a new phenomenon. Peter addresses this issue in his writings, presenting a one-sided view of the end of the age. The main message is that the day of the Lord will come unexpectedly, like a thief, and will result in the dissolution of the heavens and the earth with fire. Believers are encouraged to live lives of holiness and godliness, eagerly awaiting the new heavens and new earth promised by God.

Transcript

The following message is by Pastor John Piper. More information from *Desiring God* is available at www.desiringgod.org. 2 Peter 3, verse 8. Do not ignore this one fact, beloved, that with the Lord one day is as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day. The Lord is not slow about His promise, as some count slowness, but is forbearing toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance.

But the day of the Lord will come like a thief, and then the heavens will pass away with a loud noise, and the elements will be dissolved with fire, and the earth and the works that are upon it will be burned up. Since all these things are thus to be dissolved, what sort of persons ought you to be in lives of holiness and godliness, waiting for and hastening the coming of the day of God, because of which the heavens will be kindled and dissolved, and the elements will melt with fire? But according to His promise we wait for new heavens and a new earth, in which righteousness dwells. Therefore, beloved, since you wait for these, be zealous to be found by Him without spot or blemish, and at peace, and count the forbearance of our Lord as salvation.

Now in order to understand these verses 10 through 14 of 2 Peter 3, I think we need to keep in mind that still, Peter has in view this false teaching that we have been encountering week after week in these verses. The false teaching, you remember, most recently came to expression in verse 4 of chapter 3, and

there they had their say, and what they said was, Where is the promise of Christ coming? For ever since the fathers fell asleep, all things have continued as they were from the beginning of creation. In other words, the false teachers basically rejected the reality of the Second Coming, because, among other reasons, the traditional teaching that with the coming of the Lord, there would be a kind of world-transforming upheaval, is so unlikely.

It's just unbelievable, unimaginable that that should be the case, because, for thousands and thousands of years, the world has gone on just the way it did from the beginning. They said, nature is steady and constant, and this thought of an in-breaking of the Son of God, and a transformation of this created order, is out of the question. Now, I think the fact that Peter is still addressing that issue, that teaching, accounts for why he gives us such a one-sided view of the end of the age, here in these verses.

Now, what I mean by a one-sided view of the end is this. The whole discussion of the end, or the Second Coming, gets started in verse 4, with the promise of His coming, or with the scoffers denying His coming. But after that verse, the Second Coming is never mentioned again, even though that seemed to be the issue.

All he deals with is just one side of that coming, namely, what's going to happen to the world when Jesus comes. His picture of the end of the age is remarkably simple. It's just fire is going to destroy the sky, it's going to destroy the earth and everything on the earth, and in their place is going to be a new heavens and a new earth.

Period. That's his picture of the end that he presents here. He doesn't show us how this picture relates to the Second Coming.

He doesn't show us how it relates to the Rapture. He doesn't show us how it relates to the Millennium. He doesn't show us how it relates to judgments according to works.

He doesn't show us how it relates to how Christians are going to get through this conflagration into the new heavens and the new earth. He settles simply to say it's all going to be burned up and there'll be a new one in its place. Period.

And my point is that the reason he's willing to settle for such a simplified view of the end is that that's exactly what the false teachers needed to hear. Peter is trying to save these new converts that were being lured into this false teaching and this is apparently exactly what they needed to hear. Now what they have been saying, the false teachers, or what we have seen them doing, basically, is being devoted to the world.

So it makes sense, doesn't it, that Peter should offer the very simplified statement the world's going to be burned up. In other words, don't devote yourself to accumulating money. They were lining their pockets with the new converts' money.

Don't give yourself over to sexual licentiousness. Don't build monuments for the praise of men because it's all going to be burned up. It's going to come to nothing.

That seems to be the emphasis that he hits. And for Peter, he would have blunted the rapier of his warning if he had taken another couple of chapters to spell out all the details of how this fiery end related to all the other things we know in Scripture about the end of the age. And I think that there's probably a lesson there for us.

On the one hand, it is a legitimate theological enterprise to endeavor to take all the pictures, the snapshots of the end of the age that you have in the Bible, and arrange them into a coherent system or a mosaic so that it all makes sense. That's legitimate. But on the other hand, we should remember that the biblical writers almost always pick one or two pieces or parts of the picture of the end and drive them home for all their work when they're trying to motivate godliness or create sobriety or stimulate faith and hope in their hearers.

And I think probably that in our normal everyday witness and exhortation to one another, that's the way we're going to use the end of the age too. We'll pick out one dimension of it that seems to bear home on the person we're talking to, and that's what we'll emphasize. And we have biblical warrant for doing it that way.

So let's zero in now on these verses and look at them more closely and see what Peter is admonishing us and his churches to do. Verse 10. The day of the Lord will come like a thief.

I think it was Jesus who put together those two things, the day of the Lord and the idea that it will be like a thief coming in the night. Matthew 24, 42. Jesus said, Watch therefore, for you do not know the day when your Lord is coming, but know this, that if the householder had known in what part of the night the thief was coming, he would have watched and would not have let his house be broken into.

Jesus is the one who dared to compare the coming of Jesus Christ with a thief coming in the night. Then Paul picks up this analogy and applies it to the Thessalonian church in 1 Thessalonians 5 like this. The day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night.

When people say there is peace and security, then sudden destruction will come upon them as travail comes upon a woman with child and there will be no escape. But you are not in darkness, brethren, that that day should overtake you like a thief in the night. So three things clearly are involved in this conception of the day of the Lord coming like a thief.

First, the day of the Lord involves the coming of Jesus Christ. Second, it involves suddenness, unexpectedness and destruction for unbelievers. And third, it involves deliverance and salvation to those who are awake and doing that which the Lord has called them to do.

Now, Peter goes a step further, however, in unfolding the meaning of the day of the Lord. So let's read the rest of verse 10. The day of the Lord will come like a thief and then the heavens will pass away with a loud noise and the elements will be dissolved with fire and the earth and the works that are on it will be burned up.

Now, let's finish out the picture by dropping down to verse 12. Here in verse 12, he uses a different phrase, not the day of the Lord, but the day of God, but they mean the same thing. And he says that it will mean the heavens will be kindled and dissolved, by heavens he means sky, and the elements will melt with fire.

Now, let's pause for a minute and think about what he means by this day of the Lord and it's bringing this world to an end in a fiery cataclysm. In the Old Testament, the term the day of the Lord, very common. And what it meant was that the future time, either not far in the future or very far in the future, in which the Lord would come and he would vindicate his holy name, he would bring destruction upon his enemies who refused to repent, and he would gather his people into a new and righteous kingdom where there's peace.

Now, let's look at some of those passages, two or three of them. Right at the top of the list, probably, we should put the one that Peter quoted on the day of Pentecost from Joel chapter 2, verse 30. There it says, God speaking and describing the day of the Lord, I will give portents in the heavens and on the earth, blood and fire and columns of smoke.

The sun will be turned to darkness and the moon to blood before the great and terrible day of the Lord comes. And then Zephaniah, Zephaniah was one of the prophets who spoke after the Babylonian captivity, very near the end of the Old Testament, chapter 1, verses 14 to 18. The great day of the Lord is near, near and hastening fast.

The sound of the day of the Lord is bitter. The mighty man cries aloud there. A day of wrath, it is that day, a day of distress and anguish, a day of ruin and destruction, a day of darkness and devastation and gloom, a day of clouds, a thick, dark day, a day of trumpet blast and battle cry against the fortified cities and against the lofty battlements.

I will bring distress on men so that they walk like the blind because they have sinned against the Lord. Their blood shall be poured out like dust and their flesh like dung. Neither their silver nor their gold shall be able to deliver them on that day of wrath, says the Lord.

On the day of the Lord, in the fire of his jealous wrath, all the earth will be consumed for a full, yea, a sudden end he will make of all the inhabitants of the earth. And one more, Malachi, the last prophet of the Old Testament, spoke of the day of the Lord like this. But who can endure the day of his coming? And who can stand when he appears? For he is like a refiner's fire.

For behold, the day comes burning like an oven when all the arrogant and all the evildoers will be stubble. The day shall come and shall burn them up, says the Lord of hosts, so that it will leave them neither root nor branch. But for you who fear my name, the Son of Righteousness shall rise with healing in his wings and you shall go forth leaping like calves from the stall.

So, Peter's not saying anything new. The expectation that the wrath of God would one day boil over on this earth and do away with all the ungodly and all their works is eight centuries old when Peter was writing. Now, it might seem strange to us, it seemed strange to me at first, that God who made this world and looked at it and said, this is good, it's very good, says he's going to burn it up.

That doesn't sit well with a person who looks out on the world and sees beauty in it. But let's remember this, from Romans 8, 20 and 21, the natural world also became subject to futility and enslaved to decay when man fell into sin. Paul puts it like this, the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will, but by the will of him who subjected it in hope, for the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay.

Now, Paul does not tell us how that's going to happen. How is this great transformation of the created order going to happen so that the lion can lie down with the lamb and there'll be no death anymore and no decay? I'm inclined to think that Peter's description of the end, in view of Paul's statement, does not mean that the fiery judgment will annihilate creation. But rather, he probably means us to think in terms of a purging and a supernatural transformation of this world into a new world.

And one of the hints to that end in the text, if you go back up to verses 6 and 7, you can see Peter comparing the destruction of the world by fire at the end of the age with the destruction of the world by water at the flood in Genesis. And the water did not annihilate the world, it cleansed the world, it purged

the world. And the world was, in a sense, new at the end.

To be sure, it's going to be more radical, more upheaval, more deeply reaching, because nature itself is going to be changed, and hence this talk of dissolution and melting and fire consuming. And yet, I think it is not so great that it demands that there be no continuity between what God made at the beginning and what will be at the end. And therefore, when we get to verse 13, and Peter lays hold of this promise from Isaiah, there will be a new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells.

We don't have to think of something so radically different that it's unimaginable, because the descriptions of the new heavens and the new earth in Isaiah talk of things we know, only they're perfected, and all the old evils are done away. And therefore, what is good and pure and beautiful and good in the creation will be purged and, I believe, preserved in spite of this amazing description of fiery judgment. The text from which Peter gets his expectation of the new heavens and the new earth is Isaiah 65, 17, where it says, Behold, I create a new heavens and a new earth, and the former things shall not be remembered or come into mind, but be glad and rejoice forever in that which I create.

Now, when Peter goes a step farther and stresses that this new world will be a world in which righteousness dwells, he's telling us that the reason the old world was destroyed was because of unrighteousness, sin. And he's warning us that in the new world, those who forsook the way of the righteousness of faith, remember chapter 2, aren't going to be included, as verse 11 of chapter 1 says, they won't gain entrance into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Savior. But, as far as motivating us for godliness in the present time, verses 10 to 14 are very different and unusual, very different from chapter 2, because here there is not a word about people being judged, only the world being destroyed.

We had enough of that in chapter 2, about the ungodly coming into judgment. Here, his approach is different, so we want to look at this for a moment. In verse 11, here's the way he motivates the people.

Since all these things are thus to be dissolved, it is the world as you know it, the sky, the earth, and everything on it, what sort of persons ought you to be in lives of holiness and godliness? Now, the question I ask is, how is that a motivation for holiness and godliness, that the world's going to be burned up? Most people today, and I think it was true in Peter's day as well, try to find meaning in life by building something. That's not just here today and gone tomorrow. Most people try to overcome a sense of finitude and littleness by making something significant that lasts.

Some people try to build equity, and they get a great sense of power and lastingness and a sense of success by looking at their house and saying, I own that, or flipping through their portfolio and thinking about how wise they invested when it was low and sold when it was high. Others build a professional reputation through working hard, long hours, and they gain a sense of power and success by thinking about how many people are dependent on them for leadership and how many people look to them for making wise decisions. Other people try to build meaning into their lives with artistic expressions and creativity, and they gain a sense of power by looking at the things they've written, or have painted, or have shaped.

And others, perhaps with less artistic ability, try to build the same kind of power through hobbies and collections. I've got the biggest button collection, or beetles, or coins, or something, and we boast in how shiny our car is, or our new Apple computer, or, or, or. We want to make, we want to build, we want to have something significant, and the false teachers in 2 Peter were doing that, and here was their array of things that gave meaning to their life.

They lined their pockets with money, they despised authority and elevated themselves above the apostles, they gave themselves over to sexual licentiousness and gained a great sense of power over mastering in sexuality, and they put themselves forward as very astute interpreters of the hard letters of Paul, and had a great sense of significance and power. And Peter says to them, in effect, it's going to burn up! The implication of verse 11 is this, the only things that are going to survive the fiery judgment of God at the end of this age are expressions of holiness and godliness. I saw that black glass plaque every day as I was growing up, little silver chain around it, hanging on the right hand side of the stairway going into the basement, right across from the pencil sharpener.

Up and down I'd go every day, and it hung there with its white painting and its little green tree. It hangs now in our kitchen for our sons to grow up seeing, and it said, Only one life, which will soon be past, only what's done for Christ will last. That's good for a little boy to grow up on.

And that's the meaning of verse 11. The only thing that is going to survive that fiery judgment is holiness, godliness, and the expressions of them. A life lived for the world will go naked into judgment, and a life lived for Christ will be laden with riches in the last day.

When the main doors open at the Metrodome, you've been there? Not the revolving doors, but the main doors, you get blown out with a tremendous gust of wind, 20, 30 miles an hour I'd reckon, because of the air pressure under that dome. Everybody's hair was going whoosh, as we walked out Thursday night. Now, picture the first Metrodome tropical bird show.

And here's this guy walking through the Metrodome, collecting feathers. He's going to build a collection of feathers like nobody else has. End of the day, he's got his arms full of feathers from every bird in the Metrodome.

And he comes to the door, and they open it, and his feathers get blown all over Fifth Street and Chicago Avenue. Ridiculous? That's a flattering picture to the people who devote themselves in this life to finding meaning and lasting significance in money and reputation and monuments to their own praise of any kind. And it's a very tragic thing, because it's all going to be blown away in the judgment, or, back to Peter's metaphor, it's going to be burned up.

And the lesson is this. Put your life under the spotlight of eternity. View things the way God views them, and then devote yourself every day, in all that you do, to what will last, and not what will be burned up.

And according to verse 12, then, if you do this, you will hasten the coming of the day of God. Now, what does that mean? Hasten the day. Well, remember verse 9 said that God is holding back the day because He wants you to repent.

That must mean, then, that if you do repent and lead a life of godliness, you remove one of the reasons for delay. And therefore, Peter concludes that a life that repents and walks in holiness, in that sense, hastens the day of the Lord. Now, it's clear that we don't hasten it in an absolute sense.

It says in Acts chapter 1 verse 7 that God has appointed, by His authority, the day. It doesn't get faster as far as God's concerned. Jesus said, the Father knows the day and the hour when the Son of Man will come.

But from our standpoint, from our limited vantage point, we can hasten the day of the Lord in the sense that we remove any hindrances to it. We fulfill the conditions of its coming, which, according to Scripture,

would be the preaching of the gospel to all the nations and the ingathering of that full number of Gentiles that have to come in before the end comes. And now, finally, I want to look at one more thing with you in verses 13 and 14, and that is a very different motivation for godliness, for purity.

Here, He doesn't say, be careful for what you might lose in the age to come when things are burned up. Here, He says, look at what you can gain in the new heavens and the new earth. Verse 13, He says that according to God's promise, we are waiting for new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells.

And then, just like He did in chapter 1, He draws the inference for daily life. Therefore, beloved, since you wait for these things, and probably has most immediate reference to the new heavens and the new earth, since you're waiting for a new heaven and a new earth in which righteousness dwells, be zealous to be found by Him without spot or blemish and at peace. Now, how in the world can people like us be found without spot or blemish at the coming of Jesus? I think that there is a parallel to this verse that gives an answer.

In my Bible, it's right across the page, in 1 John chapter 1, verse 7. 1 John 1, 7, notice as we read this verse, the parallel between spotlessness and blemishlessness and living at peace, and the condition for experiencing that. John says, if we walk in the light as God is in the light, we have fellowship with one another. That parallels living at peace.

And the blood of Jesus, His Son, cleanses us from all sin. That parallels being without spot or blemish. But notice that both fellowship and cleansing, as John says it, or peace and spotlessness, as Peter says it, are dependent upon walking in the light as God is in the light.

When Peter says, be zealous to be found by God without spot or blemish and at peace, I think he means just the same thing John does when he says, walk in the light as God is in the light. And so the last question I ask is, and where do we find the power to do that? To walk in the light as God is in the light. And the answer, as you may guess, comes from chapter 1 of 2 Peter.

God's divine power has granted to us all things that pertain to life and godliness through the knowledge of Him who called us into His glory and excellence, by which He has granted to us precious and very great promises, in order that through these you might escape from the corruption that is in the world and become partakers of the divine righteousness. It's when we set our eyes and our affections on the promise of a new heaven and a new earth in which righteousness dwells and in which the glory and excellency of God are going to cover the earth like the waters cover the sea. When we relish that promise and hope in that promise, the power of God fires us with a zeal for purity and gives us the strength to overcome all temptation from the little sparks of enticement around us.

So in conclusion, in summary, there are two motivations for sanctification that God gives us in this text. One is that the only thing that will survive the fiery judgment at the end of this age is holiness. And everything else that we devote ourselves to will be burned up.

And therefore we're just gathering feathers for the Metrodome door whenever we do anything except live for Jesus. And the other motivation is that there is coming a new heavens and a new earth that are so bright with promise and righteousness and glory. How can we not walk in the light as he is in the light? How can we not put the lamp in front of us until the day dawns and the morning star rises in our hearts? Shall we pray? Lord Jesus, I pray first as the consummation of this message that you might bring any in

this room who are depending on anything but you for salvation and for hope to repentance.

Lord, let no one leave this room an unbeliever in Jesus Christ, I ask. Too much is at stake. Too much glorious life in the light of the promises is possible.

Too much fearful prospect of judgment is coming fast. Oh, that we might repent. And then I pray for those who know you.

Lord, grant us to be peacemakers in the world. You said that we are to be found spotless and blameless and at peace. And I pray that in a world filled with hostility, you might make us peaceful.

Peaceful in the church. Peaceful in our neighborhoods. Peaceful in a world being torn apart by wars and rumors of wars.

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