

Message #7

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1 Peter

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STRANGERS IN A STRANGE LAND

1 PETER 2:11-17

I.

My father's father was born in Sweden. He came over to this country through England and Ellis Island in 1901 when he was 22 years old. He didn't know very much English, but he determined to figure out a way to make a life for himself in the New World. Among other things, he worked at farming, laying track for the railroads, and cutting timber. At one point he and a couple of his brothers made a contract with the Canadian government to cut timber in British Columbia. My grandfather led a crew of men in that project. Canada got involved in WWI, and the government stopped paying my grandfather. The crew of workers got restless that they weren't getting paid. My grandfather and his brothers ran out of money. The crew became so angry that my grandfather and his brothers feared for their lives. One night they left everything and came back to the US.

My grandfather ended up meeting my grandmother, another Swede, in Duluth, Minnesota, and starting a farm in northern Wisconsin. He also learned better English. Eventually they both became American citizens. As strangers in a strange land, they both had to figure out how to live in a new country and a new culture.

Many of you have also had parents or grandparents who moved here from other countries. They also had to get adjusted to life in the New World. They had to figure out how to relate to the culture of this country. They also had to decide how they were going to relate to the government. At some point most of them chose to become citizens.

We have seen from our study of 1 Peter that the Apostle says that we who are Christians are all strangers of a sort in this world in which we live. For we are citizens of a heavenly kingdom. As such, we have a responsibility to figure out how to relate to the unbelieving world around us. Peter has said that the behavior of Christians should always be characterized by holiness. A couple of weeks ago we saw that holiness in relationship to fellow Christians means loving one another earnestly from a pure heart.

In our passage today he describes what holiness means in relationship to the unsaved world and in relationship to civil government.

I.A.

First, in vv. 11 & 12 (PROJECTOR ON--- HOLINESS IN RELATIONSHIP TO THE UNBELIEVING WORLD) Peter describes what HOLINESS means IN RELATIONSHIP TO THE UNBELIEVING WORLD. Verse 11 describes THE NEGATIVE ASPECT of that subject. (I. HOLINESS IN... A. THE NEGATIVE ASPECT) It means ABSTAIN FROM THE PASSIONS OF THE FLESH. Verse 12 describes the positive aspect. Peter writes in v. 11, **“Beloved, I urge you as sojourners and exiles to abstain from the passions of the flesh, which wage war against your soul.”** The term “passions of the flesh” covers a wide range of behaviors, all of which are labeled by the Bible as sin.

In Galatians #5 vv. 19-21 Paul describes “works of the flesh,” (PROJECTOR ON--- GALATIANS 5:19-21) which seem to refer to the same category of behavior. He writes, **“Now the works of the flesh are evident, which are: sexual immorality, impurity, sensuality, idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries, dissensions, divisions, envy, drunkenness, orgies, and things like these.”**

That list covers a fairly wide expanse of our sin nature. Peter says: Don’t cultivate that sin nature. Stay away from these things. Don’t go to places that will tempt you to be involved with such behavior. Stay away from web sites that will promote wrong behavior. Don’t mess around with these things.
(PROJECTOR OFF)

Why? Two reasons. One is that these sinful desires wage war against the soul. The term “soul” here seems to refer to the entire personality and life of a believer. The desires of the sin nature are at war with this soul. They want to destroy us, to conquer us. If we don’t abstain from them, then anger will make us into a bitter, critical, short-tempered person. That sexual lust will take over our thought life. That desire for things will make us into a materialist. That desire for drink will make us into an alcoholic.

If lust is a temptation in our family, we may need an internet filter for our computers. If we tend to abuse alcohol, we need to get the stuff out of the house. If we tend to get into fights with certain people, we may need to stay away from them. If we get jealous because the Jones’s have so many more things than we do, we may need to help out over at Emergency Aid to get a better perspective on life.

We need to abstain from these fleshly lusts because they are out to destroy us. We also need to abstain from them because of who we are. In our second message from this little book we saw Peter describe Christians as “elect aliens.” Here he uses the expression “strangers and aliens.” The idea is that this world is not our real home. It is only our temporary residence. The philosophy “Eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow you shall die,” should not apply to us. We are citizens of another kingdom. We are merely pilgrims on a journey to heaven. We should, therefore, not cater to the passions of the flesh.

B.

Verse 12 describes THE POSITIVE ASPECT (PROJECTOR ON--- I. A. B. THE POSITIVE ASPECT). It means KEEP YOUR CONDUCT HONORABLE. **“Keep--- or, more literally--- keeping your conduct among the Gentiles honorable--- that is, the unsaved--- so that when they speak against you as evildoers, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day of visitation.”**

What is the “day of visitation?” The only other time that this word “visitation” is used in the New Testament in a theological sense is in Luke #19 v. 44. (PROJECTOR ON--- LUKE 19:44) There Jesus is talking about the time that is coming when the Romans will destroy Jerusalem and level it to the ground. He says that it will happen because **“you did not know the time of your visitation”**--- that is, the time when Jesus Christ, God in the flesh, was present with them. Given the usage of the word in Luke 19:44 and the theme of the book of 1 Peter, I suspect that the Apostle in our passage is referring to the Second Coming of Christ. The goal of godly behavior and good works is the conversion of unbelievers so that when Christ returns, they will also be able to glorify God as genuine followers of Him and His Son.

Jesus Himself described this kind of desirable behavior and its intended results in the Sermon on the Mount. In Matthew #5 v. 16 (MATTHEW 5:16) He said, **“In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven.”**

In the first century Christians took a lot of flack for their faith. They were slandered as evildoers. (PROJECTOR OFF) Their lifestyle was so contrary to that of the immoral Romans that they were called “haters of the human race.” Because they didn’t worship the Roman gods, they were labeled “atheists.”

Christians called their celebrations of the Lord’s Supper “love feasts.” The non-Christians jumped on that one and accused the Christians of participating in orgies. Unbelievers spoke of Christians eating the body and blood of Christ, and they spread rumors about cannibalism. Even the Roman historian Tacitus said that Christians were notorious for their depravity, basing that comment upon these malicious rumors.

The way to handle that kind of slander, Peter says, is to live a godly life. For the most part those early Christians did. By the fourth century the church historian Eusebius wrote, **“The splendor of the true church grew in magnitude and power and reflected in its piety and simplicity and freedom and the modesty and purity of its inspired life.... so that none ventures to slander us as our ancient enemies formerly delighted to do.”** (*Church History*, VII, 13-14)

The way that believers respond in the midst of trials can make a tremendous impact upon the unbelieving world. The nineteenth century German philosopher Heinrich Heine once remarked, **“You show me your redeemed life, and I will be inclined to believe in your redeemer.”** How do we do when unbelievers unjustly slander us?

Estimates of the number of Christians in mainland China today range widely from about 50 million to well over 100 million people. If the higher numbers are right, it would mean that there are more genuine believers there than in the US. But the church in China is a persecuted church. Christianity is regarded by the Communist government as a threat. So Christians are often slandered as evildoers.

In the east-central province of Henan whole villages have become Christian. In one area of Henan farmers from a non-Christian village accused a nearby Christian village of only working six days a week. They complained to officials that the Christian villagers sang hymns and enjoyed themselves on Sunday.

But these Christian villagers had also abstained from passions of the flesh and kept their behavior honorable among the Gentiles. So the response of the Chinese officials was this: **“You work seven days, they work six days, but they produce more. In your villages you have problems with theft and other crimes that are not found in the Christian village. So our conclusion is that six is better than seven.”**

Our society is increasingly moving in the direction of Roman society in the first century. Christians are being labeled as extremists, as enemies of society. The Barna Group released survey results in 2016 that showed that many believers regard Christians as a threat to society. Barna President David Kinnamon says, **“The perception that the Christian faith is extreme is now firmly entrenched among the nation’s non-Christians. A full 45% of atheists, agnostics, and religiously unaffiliated in America agree with the statement “Christianity is extremist.”**”

A survey taken several years ago by the Institute for Jewish and Community Research found that 53% of 1200 college and university faculty members who were surveyed reported that they had “unfavorable” feelings toward evangelical Christians. Only 22% reported similar feelings toward Muslims. If you go to school at a secular university, you are more likely to get a favorable reception from professors if you identify yourself as a student from Saudi Arabia than as an evangelical Christian.

The most effective way to confront this is to keep our behavior honorable among the Gentiles. We can reject their lifestyle, but we also need to respect and care about individual homosexuals. We can reject abortion, but we need to care about unwed mothers and their babies and women who have undergone abortions. We can oppose radical feminism, but we men must also love our wives and daughters and mothers, and we must treat other women with respect. When evangelicals in recent years took a lead in promoting legislation to restrict international sex trafficking, they won recognition from many political liberals. Yet there are abuse scandals which have also been revealed that involve Southern Baptists leaders and megachurch pastors.

We Christians, with God’s help, need to work at getting our own act together. As Cal Thomas wrote in one of his columns several years ago, **“For Christians to gain the respect, if not always the approval, of those who define culture, they must first get their own house in order.... How can a spiritually dysfunctional church hope to speak truth to an even more dysfunctional culture when it has lost its moral compass and compromised its message by allowing internal rot?”** We need to work at keeping our behavior honorable among the Gentiles.

II.

The way that we Christians exhibit holiness to the unsaved world is closely related to the second theme in our passage, which involves HOLINESS IN RELATIONSHIP TO GOVERNMENT. (PROJECTOR ON--- II. HOLINESS IN RELATIONSHIP...) In vv. 13-15 Peter says, **“Be subject for the Lord’s sake to every human institution, whether it be to the emperor as supreme, or to governors as sent by him to punish those who do evil and to praise those who do good. For this is the will of God, that by doing good you should put to silence the ignorance of foolish people.”**

Our responsibility toward government is to submit to it, to obey the governing officials, whether that involves the top ruler or lesser officials, whether the person in the White House is a Republican or a Democrat. In v. 13 Peter says that we are to do it for the Lord’s sake. In v. 14 he says that it is the will of God. Peter explains a bit more by saying that this course of behavior will silence, or muzzle, the ignorance of foolish men. Christians in the Roman Empire were often accused of being disloyal to the

state, of being poor citizens. Peter says: Obey the government, and by your actions show that you are good citizens.

We are to obey government for the Lord's sake and because it is the will of God. But still we might wonder: What is the Lord's purpose in this? The overall picture that the Bible presents is that government has been ordained by God as a restraint upon sin in the world. The leaders of government have been put there by God to accomplish His sovereign purposes.

So have the leaders of Communist China and North Korea and Iran and Venezuela been put in power ultimately by God? The answer is yes. God is sovereign. That does not mean that all leaders are good. Some of them are evil. But God has His purposes even for evil rulers. In the Old Testament God makes it clear that the leaders of some of Israel's enemies were put in power for the purpose of judging Israel. Sometimes the Lord humbles bad leaders to demonstrate His power. Certainly we saw that with Saddam Hussein.

Sometimes bad leaders are better than no leaders or than anarchy. Bashar al-Assad (BASHAR AL-ASSAD) is an evil man. He has been the ruler of Syria since 2000. Rebellion against his rule broke out in 2012. Since that time an estimated 500,000 Syrians have died in the conflict. Over 11.7 million have been forced out of their homes. More than 6.1 million Syrians have been displaced within their own country, and 5.6 million have fled the country as refugees. Persecution of Christians has increased. Prior to the conflict Christianity had been tolerated in Syria. In retrospect, people might have been better off if they had not rebelled against this evil ruler. (Concern USA, March 2018) (PROJECTOR OFF)

It may be helpful to consider the kind of government that was in power at the time when Peter wrote his words of exhortation. The Roman government gave its approval to a social system that included an estimated 60 million slaves. The government also gave its approval to infanticide. The rich would abandon children to limit the number of heirs to their estate, and the poor would do it to limit the number of mouths to feed. The fate that these children met was death, prostitution, slavery, or occasionally adoption by some kind stranger.

In 1 BC a man by the name of Hilarion wrote to his pregnant wife, **“Know that I am still in Alexandria. And do not worry if they all come back and I remain in Alexandria. I ask and beg you to take good care of our baby son, and as soon as I receive payment I will send it up to you. If you are delivered of child [before I get home]--- if it is a boy, keep it; if a girl discard it.”** (Oxyrynchus Papyrus 744)

Despite a political system that tolerated and encouraged such evil practices there is nothing in the New Testament writings that encourages rebellion or even civil disobedience from Christians. The command is to pray, to preach the gospel, and to submit to government.

In Peter's day there were some nasty men who were ruling in Rome. Between 41 and 54 AD, when most of the events in the Book of Acts took place, Claudius was emperor. He had a series of five wives. Two of them he divorced. One he murdered. During his reign he killed 35 senators and 300 other political leaders in his government. He enjoyed watching executions and the torture of prisoners and the gladiator games, where there was much blood and gore.

One production that Claudius arranged purely for entertainment purposes was a naval battle involving 50 ships. Two thousand criminals and hundreds of captured enemy soldiers were divided up into two navies and forced to fight each other. Three thousand died, purely for the enjoyment of the emperor, his government bureaucrats, and other leading citizens.

Nero followed Claudius. He ruled from 54 to 68 AD. Nero was a fairly decent fellow early in his reign. It was during this time that Paul wrote in Romans #13 (PROJECTOR ON--- ROMANS 13), **"Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God."**

But Nero became increasingly corrupt. In 64 AD, at about the time that Peter was writing our passage, there was a huge fire that burned much of Rome. Nero blamed the Christians for it. He proceeded to commit horrible atrocities against them. Yet two years later, when Paul wrote to Titus, he said (TITUS 3:1-2), **"Remind them to be submissive to rulers and authorities, to be obedient, to be ready for every good work, to speak evil of no one, to avoid quarreling, to be gentle, and to show perfect courtesy toward all people."**

Christians have a responsibility to submit to the governing authorities. Why? Because it is God's will for us. Civil government and its leaders have been ordained by God. God has them in power for a reason.

That does not mean that there are no limits on our obedience. Peter himself was hauled in before the Sanhedrin in Acts #4 and was ordered to stop preaching about Jesus. (ACTS 4:19-20) In vv. 19 & 20 Peter

and John responded, **“Whether it is right in the sight of God to listen to you rather than to God, you must judge, for we cannot but speak of what we have seen and heard.”**

Our responsibility as Christians is to obey government until government commands us to violate a command of Scripture. As much as we may dislike abortion, we have an obligation not to violate trespass laws at abortion clinics and not to restrict access by patients. (PROJECTOR OFF) When the government tells us to abort our own unborn babies, that is a different matter. Then we should refuse, even as the parents of Moses refused to kill their son. But then we Christians need to be willing to also suffer the consequences. Peter acknowledged the legal right of the Sanhedrin to take what action it wanted against him, given his refusal to stop preaching the gospel.

In v. 16 of 1 Peter #2 the Apostle continues, **“Live as people who are free, not using your freedom as a cover-up for evil, but living as servants of God.”** You have been freed from your bondage to sin and to this world. Jesus Christ is now your sovereign ruler. But that does not free you from the responsibilities that you still have to human government. As slaves of the sovereign God, submit to human rulers. Obey the law. Pay your taxes.

In v. 17 Peter summarizes the obligations of Christian citizenship, **“Honor everyone. Love the brotherhood--- notice the stress again upon loving fellow Christians. Fear God. Honor the emperor.”** We are to honor the emperor, or king, but we are to fear--- to have a reverence and awe for--- God.

In 285 Diocletian became emperor of Rome. He was perhaps the most anti-Christian of all of the Roman emperors. Once he was watching a play that made fun of Jesus. One of the actors was a man by the name of Gesenius. Gesenius had performed this play numerous times, but God’s Spirit was working on him. In the middle of the play on this day he stopped and declared, **“I want to receive the grace of Christ. I want to be born again. I want to be set free from the sins that have been my ruin.”**

Apparently Gesenius had been converted on the spot. He turned to the emperor and said, **“Illustrious Emperor and all of you who have laughed at this parody, believe me, Jesus Christ is the true king.”**

That did not please the emperor. He commanded that Gesenius be ripped with animal claws, burned alive, and then beheaded. Nevertheless, Gesenius responded, **“There is no king except Christ, whom I have seen and whom I worship. For Him I will die a thousand times. I am sorry for my sins and for**

becoming so late a soldier of the true king.” Gesenius honored the king, but he feared God.
(*Ecclesiastical History*, Fleury, 11:476)

There is an important difference between the situation that the Christians in the first century faced and the situation that we Christians living in the twenty-first century in the USA face. They had little political power. They were subject to an authoritarian government. We are not. We are subject to a democratic government. We have access to political power. The Apostle Paul was willing to exercise what rights he had as a Roman citizen when he thought that it would further the Christian cause. We should do the same. Too often we have failed to do so.

Our goal should not be to create a theocracy, a civil government controlled by Christians. But it should be to create a government that promotes peace and law and order and principles of righteousness. Christians ought to be involved in the political process. At the very least, we ought to vote.

William Wilberforce (PROJECTOR ON--- WILLIAM WILBERFORCE) was a member of Parliament in Great Britain for 45 years, beginning in 1780. He was also a Christian man. John Newton, the pastor and author of “Amazing Grace,” was one of his mentors. Wilberforce’s convictions inspired him to lead a long campaign against the institution of slavery. In 1788 he led the effort to pass a bill to end British participation in the slave trade. His comments in Parliament in favor of the bill were met with these objections: **“Humanity is a private feeling, not a public principle to act upon,”** sniffed the Earl of Abington. Lord Melbourn angrily agreed: **“Things have come to a pretty pass when religion is allowed to invade private life.”** Today the mantra is that we must maintain a barrier between church and state.

Fortunately, however, Wilberforce’s Christian convictions did affect his political views and those of several other members of Parliament. Eventually they succeeded in seeing that a law was passed which ended British involvement in the slave trade. Later slavery was banned in the British Empire, some 33 years before it happened in the US. (PROJECTOR OFF)

We Christians ought to exert a similar diligence in regard to sanctity of life issues. If life does begin at conception, then abortion, except when the life of the mother is threatened, is wrong. Stem cell experimentation that involves destruction of embryos is wrong. With in vitro fertilization, extra embryos are typically produced. What happens to them if they are seemingly not needed? If human life is sacred, then euthanasia is wrong. If homosexuality is wrong, then legitimizing homosexual marriages is going to be detrimental to our society. At the same time we are responsible to work within the law to promote our views.

The ultimate example of the misuse of civil authority was the crucifixion of our Lord. The governing authorities condemned the Son of God, through whom the world had been created. The creatures hung the Creator on the cross. This Son of God could have called on the legions of angels to remove Him. He could have breathed the Word, and His oppressors would have been destroyed. But He did not. Our Savior, the leader of our faith, submitted Himself to the governing authorities. He submitted Himself to the will of God. Should we not do the same? Holiness for us means obeying civil government and keeping our behavior excellent among the Gentiles.