*Aliens and Sojourners*

1 Peter 2:11-12

1/22/29

Today is not the first time we have talked about our text. I used them to introduce this series because they encapsulate the message of 1 Peter. They also close the opening section of the letter, where the focus has been on instructing us in holy living. The section began in 1:14 by saying: *As obedient children, do not be conformed to the former lusts which were yours in your ignorance, but like the holy one who called you, be holy yourselves also in all your behavior; because it is written, “You shall be holy, for I am holy.”*  Note the similarity with our text today. As aliens and sojourners, we are to abstain from fleshly desires and pursue excellent behavior. In the first text, we are children who avoid the lusts of our former life in order to reflect the holiness of God. In today’s text we are strangers in the world who avoid fleshly desires in order to demonstrate God’s glory in our actions. These texts bookend to the opening section of the letter.

The text opens by reminding us that we are aliens and sojourners in the world. An alien is an outsider, or someone who does not belong. We use this term to describe those who live in our country but do not enjoy the privileges of citizenship. Last week we thought about our true citizenship in the terms *a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for God’s own possession.* Our citizenship has been transferred from the kingdom of darkness into the kingdom of Christ. This transfer means that we no longer ‘belong’ to the world even though we continue to reside in it. Like most aliens, we are despised by those who do belong to the world.

The term sojourner also reminds us that, while we do not ‘belong’ to the world, it remains our temporary abode. Sojourning draws our minds to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, who lived in Canaan without possessing it. God promised to give the land to their descendants; but in their lifetimes, it still belonged to the Canaanites. So Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob sojourned in the land waiting for God to fulfill His promises. So it is with believers. Having received the promise of salvation and begun to enjoy the benefits of it, we sojourn on this earth waiting for the return of Christ and full enjoyment of all His promises. While we wait, we work for His purposes.

Now, Peter’s primary concern in this letter is to instruct us on how we do that well. Our text gives two commands that capture the essence of his instruction. First, we are to abstain from living like the world; second, we behave like ambassadors of Christ’s kingdom. That is the message of 1 Peter in a nutshell. Because of whom we are in Christ, we are to behave like members of His kingdom rather than as citizens of the world.

Vs. 11 contains a prohibitive command, urging us to *abstain from fleshly lusts.* Notice the strength of Peter’s plea. He urges us, meaning that this is of first importance for our spiritual health. What does he urge us to do? *Abstain from fleshly lusts.* This command reminds us of the spiritual battle we face every day. Before we are saved, our are spiritually dead. As such, we were cold towards God, unable to do anything that pleases Him, and unwilling to submit to His ways. Salvation changes that, as our spiritually dead souls are infused with the life of Christ through the miracle of the new birth. Now, we are reconciled to God and are given a new nature that makes us alive to Him. This new nature causes us to love Him and to desire to please Him.

The challenge is that this new nature is still housed in a body of flesh that remains under the sway of sin. Ro. 7:14 says that our flesh is sold into bondage to sin, making sin the natural disposition of our flesh. This creates the war between our new nature in Christ, that desires to please God, and our flesh that still wants to feed on sin. Paul describes this war in Rom. 7:15ff.

For what I am doing, I do not understand; for I am not practicing what I would like to do, but I am doing the very thing I hate. But if I do the very thing I do not want to do, I agree with the Law, confessing that the Law is good. So now, no longer am I the one doing it, but sin which dwells in me. For I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh; for the willing is present in me, but the doing of good is not. For the good that I want, I do not do, but I practice the very evil that I do not want. But if I am doing the very thing I do not want, I am no longer the one doing it, but sin which dwells in me. I find then the principle that evil is present in me, the one who wants to do good. For I joyfully concur with the law of God in the inner man, but I see a different law in the members of my body, waging war against the law of my mind and making me a prisoner of the law of sin which is in my members. Wretched man that I am! Who will set me free from the body of this death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord! So then, on the one hand I myself with my mind am serving the law of God, but on the other, with my flesh the law of sin.

Every Christian resonates with these verses. We genuinely want to please God, yet we find ourselves regularly engaging in the very sins we hate. Our flesh craves sin, while our new nature craves the glory and greatness of God. These two elements wage an unceasing war in our members. The question is, *what do we do about it?*

The presence of fleshly desires in us it not where our problem lay. It is what we do with them that matters. Our text says we are to abstain from them. When fleshly lusts arise, we are to deny those desires so that sin may not gain a foothold in us. When we act on fleshly lusts, we feed the problem of sin and give Satan the greenlight to continue to attack us. So fleshly desires are to be cut off at the knees before they become sinful actions. Gal. 5 tells us we do this by crucifying the flesh with its passions and desires so that we may walk by the Spirit. If we walk by the Spirit, then we will not carry out the desires of the flesh (Gal. 5:16). Sin must be denied by the believer, no matter how strong the pull of our flesh is.

Peter urges us to abstain from sin because it wages war on our souls. Sin cannot take salvation away from one of God’s children; but it can rob us of intimacy with God. It hinders the free flow of His grace in our lives, weakens our spiritual health, makes us ineffective in His service, presences a distorted picture of God’s holiness to the world, and brings pain, chaos, and death to our lives. Sin wages war on our souls, keeping us from enjoying the abundant life Christ has given us. Just because Satan has lost control of us does not mean he wants us to enjoy fellowship with God or be fruitful in His service. 1 Pet. 5:8 tells us that Satan prowls like a roaring lion seeking someone to devour. He must be resisted. When we give in to temptation, we give him a foothold in our lives to wage war against our souls. Sin saps all spiritual vitality from us. We must flee sin just like Joseph did when he fled from the presence of Potiphar’s wife. We kill the desires of the flesh because we want unhindered fellowship with God and to be accurate reflectors of His holiness and glory to the world. All of this moves us to abstain from sin.

Vs. 12 shifts the focus in a more positive direction by telling us what we should do. Not only are we to abstain from sin, but we are to pursue what is right. Peter states it in this way: *keep your behavior excellent among the gentiles.* Gentile in this context is used to describe the Roman world in which these believers lived. As they lived in the time and circumstances God placed them in, they were to keep their behavior excellent.

Notice, Peter does not tell them to have good behavior. They were not to be above average or to look better than their neighbor. No, they were to be excellent in their behavior. The perfection of Christ is the standard Christians are to strive after. Believers’ lives should demonstrate Christ’s power, not only to forgive sin, but also to end its mastery in our lives. We were born again to a living hope. That hope should be visible in our behavior.

We do this even in the face of opposition and conflict. The center of vs. 12 reminds us that suffering is the context for this letter. Believers were being slandered as evildoers. Even though they had done nothing wrong, they were maligned because of their faith. We have talked about this phenomenon before. Because the world loves darkness, they hate how the light of Christ exposes their evil deeds. As Christians keep their behavior excellent among the world, the world will look for ways to slander us as evil doers, lest the evil and hypocrisy of their own lives be exposed. Slander is often a desperate attempt to flee the conviction of God’s word by maligning the messenger. We see this in the story of Elijah. King Ahab led Israel into more sin than any other king. Elijah was commanded by God to reveal his sin and to pronounce God’s judgment in the form of a draught. In 1 Kings 18, Elijah went to confront him again, only to have Ahab call him *you troubler of Israel.* The true troubler of Israel slandered God’s righteous prophet because he exposed the wickedness of the king. Wicked people use slander to destroy the righteous because of how they expose the true nature of evil.

Beloved, if we are going to stand for righteousness and truth in our cultural moment, we will be slandered as evil doers who are the problem not the solution. Speak truth on gender, sexuality, race, or any number of other issues, and you will be cancelled from the public discourse. Yet this should not change our behavior. The text says we are to persist in doing good deeds. As we continually to do what is right, people will see it. Things like a good work ethic, integrity, honesty, faithfulness, and so on never go out of style. Even the most hardened and immoral of sinners appreciates an employee who always shows up on time, does quality work, and is reliable. As we consistently do what is right in the face of slander and mistreatment, eventually there will be those who see our good deeds and glorify God in the day of visitation.

We see this principle displayed in the life of Christ. The Pharisees hated Jesus because He exposed their evil hearts and the hypocrisy of their religiosity. Therefore, they attacked, slandered, and ultimately murdered Him. Yet we see individuals from the Pharisees like Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea seeing the character of Christ, considering His message, and ultimately trusted Him for salvation. Think also of the soldiers who crucified Him. To them, Jesus was just another criminal to be executed. They gave Him no thought; yet one of them watched the manner in which He died and declared *surely this man was the Son of God.* Excellent behavior may not turn the tide of our culture or keep us from being slandered; but as we persist in doing what is right, there will be those who see our good works, ask us the reason for our hope, and ultimately accept the message of salvation, causing them to glorify God in the day of visitation.

God’s glory is to be our ultimate desire. This is what causes us to abstain from evil; and it is what sustains us when all good behavior is gets us from the world is mocking jokes, cruel caricatures, and false accusations. There is a day coming when God is going to visit the earth again. When Christ returns, the wicked will be judged and the righteous vindicated. So live for God’s approval on that day, not for man’s approval today.

The early church learned this lesson well. For the first 300 years of the church’s existence, it was violently persecuted cruelly slandered. They called their communion services *love feasts*, which is a wonderful expression of what communion is about. Yet the world said these gatherings were cannibalistic because they ate flesh and drank blood, and were drunken orgies. That rumor dominated the culture’s view of the church. When Rome burned during the days of Nero, the Christians were falsely accused of setting the city on fire, resulting in violent persecution. That persecution continued in waves for 250 more years. The reason Rome sustained their persecution of Christians for so long was because they refused to recognize the roman gods or to call Caesar god. As Rome began to loose power because of pervasive corruption, moral debauchery, and the complete breakdown of society, they blamed the Christians. Rome was losing the favor of the gods because of the atheists who refused to recognize them. Christians were being blamed for destroying society; therefore, they had to be destroyed as evil doers, lest Rome fall.

How did the church respond to these terrible accusations? They kept their behavior excellent among the Gentiles. When plague came, they cared for the sick and dying. Roman masters would treat a Christian slave cruelly, only to have them serve them faithfully and with distinction. They did quality work and lived clean lives in a very corrupt world. They adopted the babies left in the city dumps to die. They cared for widows and orphans. They loved their enemies and prayed for those who persecuted them. When arrested, they showed respect to the governing authorities. They died singing praises to God and asking Him to forgive their oppressors. Slowly, people began to question if Christians were really the problem. They seemed like model citizens and outstanding workers. How could they really be the evil doers they were slandered to be? What was the reason for their hope in the face of so much suffering? Many came to salvation through their excellent behavior. Eventually, their integrity won Rome over so that Christianity became the official religion of the empire.

Beloved, if we are going to speak God’s truth in our corrupt culture, we will be slandered as evildoers. The media is becoming more and more bold in declaring conservative Christians to be the problem in our culture, not the solution. How do we respond? We recognize that this world is not our home. We are citizens of heaven. Therefore, we abstain from evil and keep our behavior excellent. As we live in the hope of the gospel and display its transforming power in our lives, people will want to know about it. As you tell them of our wonderful Savior, some will be saved to the praise of God’s glorious grace.

*After you have suffered a little while, the God of all grace, who called you to His eternal glory in Christ, will Himself, perfect, confirm, strengthen, and establish you. To Him be dominion forever and ever. Amen.*

**Pizza with the pastor**