



Earlier this week twenty of us returned from a ten-day trip to Israel. We spent time on and around the Sea of Galilee, visited the Jordan River, traveled to the Dead Sea, and finished up in Jerusalem. In Jerusalem we saw the dome of the rock where the Temple was built, we stood on the Mount of Olives, walked through the garden of Gethsemane and saw where Jesus was crucified. Many of the sites were places the apostle Peter would have been. We saw the house in Capernaum where Jesus healed Peter's mother-in-law. Some people say that's the reason Peter went on to deny Jesus three times, but I don't believe that!

We've been studying the first of two letters Peter wrote to the churches in Asia Minor and we've come to the end of the first section of this letter. Peter has been dealing with our secure destiny. He says we're God's elect, having been chosen according to the foreknowledge of God the Father (1:1-2). He says we have an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade, and it is kept in heaven for you (1:4). He says by faith we're *"shielded by God's power until the coming of the salvation"* (1:5). He says we're a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation and God's special possession (2:9). All of this amounts to true security. Jesus put it like this, *"My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no one will snatch them out of my hand"* (John 10:27-28). What a great word! We're secure, our destiny is fixed. Once we've made Jesus our Lord, nothing can alter our destiny.

Years back, Jim Kaat, a pro baseball player, was asked how his Christian faith related to his career in sports. He told of an incident that had taken place a couple of weeks earlier. He was pitching, the game was tied, it was the bottom of the ninth inning, the bases were loaded, there were two outs, and he had a full count on the batter. And as he looked around at the base runners and down at the catcher, the thought went through his mind, "I'm glad my destiny isn't riding on this next pitch!"

You see, once we've placed our faith in Christ, we're secure. Our destiny isn't riding on our good behavior or our effective service, but on the faithfulness of God to keep his promises.

From our secure destiny, Peter moves on in the next section of his letter to how we live our lives in this world. Far from encouraging us to live a life free from all restraints, this security motivates us to live exemplary lives in this world. Peter will go on and apply that to how we relate to the governing authorities in 2:13-17. Then he'll apply it to how we relate to those we work

for in 2:18-25. Finally in 3:1-7 he'll talk about to how we relate to our spouse.

But all this is prefaced by two brief but powerful verses in 2:11-12 where Peter lays a foundation for everything else he'll go on to say in this section. He writes:

**Dear friends, I urge you, as foreigners and exiles, to abstain from sinful desires, which wage war against your soul. Live such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us.**

In these verses Peter tells us how to live in relationship to a society and a culture that's suspicious and at times even hostile to our faith: Peter doesn't tell us to conform into our culture, living as chameleons blending into the world around us. Nor does he tell us withdraw or separate from society, gathering in our little holy huddles, living in silent protest against the evil around us. Nor does he tell us to go to war with it, fighting for our place at the table, demanding change. Instead, Peter calls us to a Christianity that preserves the distinctiveness of our calling as Christ-followers while not retreating from our callings as citizens, employees and spouses.

### **We Must Understand Our Identity**

That begins with understanding our identity. His appeal is based on two critical things we must understand about our identity.

#### **We are dear friends**

The first is wrapped up in this two words "Dear Friends." It's easy to pass over that, but don't! The Greek word he uses here is from the word *agape*. It means "loved one" or "beloved." Before he commands us to do anything, he wants us to know we're dearly loved.

First, we're loved by God. As the apostle John wrote, *"See what great love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God!"* (1 John 3:1), It's so basic. "Jesus loves me this I know, for the Bible tells me so." A child can get this, but the greatest minds can't plumb its depths.

But that's not all. We're also loved by our brothers and sisters in Christ. Peter expresses a warmth and affection towards these believers. They lived far away in Asia Minor and many of them he'd probably never met, but they're his much loved friends and he lets them know that. There ought to be this kind of warmth

in our fellowship together, not only towards those we know but those we've never even met.

But there's something else about our identity Peter wants us to know.

### **We are foreigners and exiles**

He call us "foreigners and exiles in the world." The word translated "foreigners" is much like our English word, and refers to people who don't possess the legal rights of citizens. The word translated "exiles" is akin to our word "transients." A transient is someone who has no permanent residence. Remember how God called Abraham to the land of Canaan. After Sarah died he needed some land to bury her, and he said to the Hittites, "*I am a foreigner and stranger among you. Sell me some property for a burial site here so I can bury my dead*" (Gen. 23:4). Peter says that's what we are. We're transients, exiles, aliens; we have no legal status in the here and now. "Our citizenship is in heaven," to use Paul's phrase. Ultimate reality for us, the things which really count, aren't in the here and now.

So that is our identity. We're beloved exiles. I was reminded of this on our trip to Israel. Two things stuck out to me while we were there. First, we were foreigners. We didn't know the language or the customs. We really didn't have any rights to speak of. We're not used to 18-year-old Jewish kids conscripted into the Israeli army, walking around with loaded machine guns. We're not used to everything shutting down for Shabbat from Friday to Saturday evening. It was strange when we visited the Wailing Wall to see there's a men's side and women's side, and men had to cover their heads while praying. But the other thing that stuck out is we were among dear friends. Maybe we felt it more because we were foreigners, but there was a bond we felt as brothers and sisters in Christ traveling in that country. We had to stick together; we had to look out for one another.

That's what we are as we engage with this world. We're beloved exiles. We know the love of the Father as well as the love of our brothers and sisters in Christ, and we also know that this isn't our home.

### **We Must Live Exemplary Lives**

Because we have this kind of relationship to the world, Peter goes on and issues two commands: one found in verse 11, one in verse 12. One negative, one positive. One inward, one outward. Notice he said, "I urge you..." This is important; don't take it lightly! First, he says, "Abstain from sinful desires," and then he says, "Live good lives..." There's a negative and a positive: "Hold off sinful desires, but hold on to good conduct!" This is how we're to live our lives in this world.

#### **Abstain from sinful desires**

The first command is to abstain from sinful desires which wage war against our soul. The assumption is there's a war going on

within each one of us, and it never ends this side of heaven. It's a war not with the world but with our own sinful desires. It's a battle that goes on not "out there" but "in here." Our real battle isn't with the people around us but with the passions within us. D.L. Moody once said, "I have more trouble with D.L. Moody than any man I know." Our passions wage war against our soul, which is that aspect of us that's been made new and desires to please God in all we do. Our sinful desires originate within what the apostle Paul calls our flesh, our lower nature, which remains with us until we're completely transformed. If you're a Christian, you know this battle. You fight it every day.

We're inclined to identify these sinful desires with sexual lusts. And certainly, in part, that's what Peter has in mind here. The Roman world in which these people lived was full of sexual immorality, just as our own is. But Peter's term is much broader than sexual desire. He's referring to any strong passion. It might be a desire for money or power or to get even with someone that's mistreated you. As I said earlier, Peter is about to talk about submission to those in authority over us, and he may very well be referring to the tendency we have in the flesh to assert ourselves, to insist we get what is legally and rightfully ours.

You know the feeling. When you've been defrauded, or someone has wronged you, you rant and rave or seethe and insist they give you what's rightfully yours! These are sinful desires that wage war against your soul. And that's precisely what they do. They twist our personality, cause us to disintegrate as people, to be filled with resentment, bitterness and ugliness of spirit. Peter says to abstain from that sort of desire—that passion to have your way, to insist on your rights, and to get what's yours.

Now, it's true we have rights. We have rights as citizens, employees, children and spouses. And certainly we should stand up for what is right. We should never stand by and allow others' rights to be denied them. When others are exploited, stand up for them. But we should hold our own personal rights loosely and never insist on them. We can ask for them, but shouldn't insist others treat us right. Why? Because we're exiles. We have no right to insist on our rights. So hold them loosely and let God fight for you. Don't get defensive and self-justifying, and don't allow those passions to rule in your life. They're out to destroy your soul. They'll make you a narrow, barren little person. Abstain from these desires which war against the soul.

#### **Live good lives**

That's the negative side. The positive side is to "live such good lives among the pagans that though they accuse you of doing wrong they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us." This positive side is important because if you spend all your energies on your inner life, on protecting your own soul—more time alone, more self-judgment, more self-improvement, more searching your heart—you may never get

around to doing any good! The word translated "good" is a term that means not just virtue, but beauty, winsomeness, that which is admirable and honorable in the sight of others. Peter is saying, "As you live your lives in this world as exiles, be winsome. Do that which is beautiful, honorable and good."

There's something important here that's easy to miss. Back in 1:17 Peter said we should live in "reverent fear" of God. The idea there is God is watching all we do. But here we see God isn't the only one watching. We're also being watched by unbelievers, and Peter wants us to live lives that even unbelievers recognize as good. He may call them "pagans," but even pagans appreciate what is good. For example, self control was highly valued by Greek moral philosophy, even though they didn't always live up to their own ideals. Similarly, the Romans prided themselves on their system of justice. Peter expects we can live in such a way that will be seen as good even by the standards of unbelievers.

For many years my grandparents were neighbors in Los Altos with Bruce and Sue Cairns. Bruce, who has since gone to be with the Lord, was an elder at PBC. He and Sue raised their kids across the street from my grandparents, who didn't know the Lord. But the Cairns left a deep impression on my grandparents that they talked often about. They were impressed by their marriage, the way they treated each other with love and respect. They were impressed with their kids and how well behaved and respectful they were. I heard often about them as I was growing up, and then when I became a Christian and told my grandmother about it, the first people she wanted me to talk to were Bruce and Sue. My grandmother really didn't understand my Christian faith, but if I had what they had it was okay with her. They'd lived their lives before her and she knew it was good. That's what Peter is talking about here.

When we live our lives with graciousness, love, compassion and humility, others look at us and see there's something different in us, something more than can be explained merely in terms of our own personality. That's especially true when we endure harsh treatment with grace. Remember the words of the centurion at the foot of the cross? He saw Jesus subjected to an unjust trial. He heard Jesus pray for the forgiveness of those who drove nails through his hands and feet. And yet Jesus never reviled, he didn't react in a defensive, self-justifying way. And, when it was all over, this hardened Roman soldier said, "Surely this is a son of God." It was like he saw there was something in his life that couldn't be explained merely in terms of his manhood. God must be in that man! He's a son of God. And that's what people will see in us.

Now that doesn't mean we won't still get wrongly accused of things. Peter says right here they may still accuse us of doing wrong. Do you know what Christians were being accused of in Peter's day? There are a number of accounts by Roman historians

which describe those charges. They were falsely accused of murder, human sacrifice and incest, none of which were true. Tacitus, an early Roman historian, says the Christians were even guilty of "a sullen hatred of the human race."

Today, there are a lot of negative stereotypes about Christians. We're accused of being narrow, judgmental and hypocritical. We're seen as those without compassion. We're seen as people with our heads buried in the sand, ignoring the facts of science. Unfortunately, sometimes we live up to those stereotypes, but usually they're based on misunderstanding. And we should do what we can to overcome those stereotypes. There's nothing wrong with us trying to educate the non-Christian world. The early Christian apologists did this by publishing tracts and writing letters to the Roman emperor explaining what the Christian faith was really all about. It's interesting that, within a few years, the good lives of the first-century Christians silenced those charges.

One of the early church historians, Eusebius, writing much later, said: "The slanderous accusations which had been brought against the whole church also vanished, and there remained our teaching alone, which has prevailed over all.... So that not one of them now ventures to affix a base calumny upon our faith, or any such slander as our ancient enemies formerly delighted to utter."

Peter says if the people around us see our good works, even though they may accuse us of doing wrong, they'll glorify God on the day he visits us. That's pointing to the day Jesus returns to judge the living and the dead. One way or another they'll glorify God. Some will glorify him, having come to faith through your watching your good life. Others will glorify him because in the end every knee will bow and every tongue confess that Jesus is Lord to the glory of God the Father.

That is the challenge to us today: To live in this world, which often misunderstands us and mistreats us, with grace and winsomeness. Jesus said, "***You are the light of the world. A town built on a hill cannot be hidden... In the same way, let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven***" (Matt. 5:14-16). While we were in Galilee our tour guide pointed out the city Jesus was likely talking about when he said this. There's a small city that sits just northwest of the Sea of Galilee. All his listeners knew that city and the light it gave at night. In the same way, Peter is encouraging us to live our lives in such a way that others can see there's something different about us.

A few years ago, Chinese officials became fed up with high rates of crime and drug addiction in the Yunnan province. Their opium addiction made them weak and sick. Then they'd go to one of their priests, who required animal sacrifices of such extravagance the people became poor. And because they were so poor, they stole from each other, and law and order deteriorated.

It was a vicious cycle that no amount of government propaganda could break.

Then they noticed that in some villages the people were prosperous and peace loving. There was no drug problem or any stealing or social order problems. Households had a plentiful supply of pigs, oxen, and chickens. So they commissioned a survey to find out why they were different. To their astonishment, they discovered the key factor was that these villages had a majority of Christians.

Officials launched a daring experiment in 1998. They sponsored Christians to go into the troubled villages and share their faith. They started by picking out the worst village, which had 240 people, 107 of which were addicted to opium. Christians were bussed into the village at government expense, and the villagers were herded together by the police and made to listen to the testimonies of the Christians. A year later, there were 17 converts in the village, and they began to prosper because they stopped spending money on drugs. Eight of the 17 converts even had enough to own sewing machines and start small businesses. By 2002, 83 of the villagers were Christians and the prosperity spread. The government official said, "We are delighted with the results and have been extending the tactic to many other villages since then."

That's letting your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven!

I started by asking the question, how do we live in relationship to a society and a culture that's suspicious and even hostile to our faith? How do we actually make a difference?

It starts by understanding who you are. You're a beloved exile. You're beloved by God and by dear friends in Christ. Do you understand that about yourself? If your primary identity is in being

a citizen of this world and being accepted and esteemed by the people of this world, you won't be able to make a difference.

When you do that, when you understand your identity as a beloved exile, you can begin to do the two things Peter urges us to do. One has to do with your inner life, the other has to do with your outer public life. First, take care of your soul; your inner life. Shauna Niequist says, "Our souls are of fundamental importance, truly the only things besides our physical bodies that we are entirely, independently responsible to steward. Many of us take care of our bodies with great attentiveness, conscious to fill our bodies with good things, to rest them well, to move and breathe deeply. After years of being careless with both my body and soul, trusting in some vague way that they'd probably be fine no matter what, I'm learning that both body and soul require more tenderness and attentiveness than I had imagined."

Part of caring for your soul means abstaining from sinful desires that wage war against it. Take some time to identify what particular desires you have to deal with. It's different for all of us. Then bring those before the Lord and a few trusted friends. Tell them you're in a battle and you need their help and support. Don't get discouraged. You'll fall and you'll fail. We all do. But keep getting up, dust yourself off, resume the fight.

Second, with regard to your outer public life, live in such a way that the world can see what is good, beautiful, winsome and gracious. Don't conform to our culture, but don't withdraw from it or constantly rant against it either. Become a person who's known not just for what you're against, but for what you're for. Live a life that shows the distinctiveness of your calling as a Christ-follower while not retreating from your calling as neighbors, and friends, and citizens.

*This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.*