

Living for Jesus in the real world.. the pressure to confirm

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[0 : 00] Our reading is from 1 Peter chapter 4, verses 1 to 11, and that's on page 1222 of the Bibles we have with us.

Since, therefore, Christ suffered in the flesh, arm yourselves with the same way of thinking. For whoever has suffered in the flesh has ceased from sin, so as to live the rest of the time in the flesh, no longer for human passions, but for the will of God.

The time that is past suffices for doing what the Gentiles want to do, living in sensuality, passions, drunkenness, orgies, drinking parties, and lawless idolatry.

With respect to this, they are surprised when you do not join them in the same flood of debauchery, and they malign you. But they will give account to him who is ready to judge the living and the dead.

For this is why the gospel was preached, even to those who are dead, that though judged in the flesh the way people are, they might live in the spirit the way God does.

[1 : 14] The end of all things is at hand. Therefore, be self-controlled and sober-minded for the sake of your prayers. Above all, keep loving one another earnestly, since love covers a multitude of sins.

Show hospitality to one another without grumbling. As each has received a gift, use it to serve one another as good stewards of God's varied grace. Whoever speaks, as one who speaks the oracle of God.

Whoever serves, as one who serves by the strength that God supplies. In order that in everything, God may be glorified through Jesus Christ.

To him belong glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen. Great. Adrian, thank you very much for reading.

It would be great if you could keep that passage open, page 1222. And on the back of the service sheet, there are a couple of headings to show where we're going.

[2 : 27] And then some questions, because in the summer, our habit is to, after the talk, to break into small groups and to think about some of these questions.

Now, last week, Bruce brought a copy of The Spectator with him and quoted from that. And I want you to keep up our sort of cultural level. So I've brought a copy of Where's Wally?

I'm not sure whether you're familiar with Wally. There are pictures with lots of people and you have to find Wally. He's a geeky looking chap with a stripy jumper and a hat and glasses.

And the reason it's possible to find him is because he's different from every other character in the picture. He's distinctive. It's difficult to find him, but once you've seen him, he stands out.

And Peter tells us, as Christians, we are to be distinctive, standing out from the world around us. Wally's pictured in all sorts of places, just as Peter's readers who were exiles in foreign areas, and just as we're likely to be a minority in our work, in our school, in our road.

[3 : 45] Now, in some ways, Wally's a good example because he never changes. He's the same, whatever the situation around him. And with his funny hat and his glasses, he looks like the sort of person who might suffer ridicule.

And we'll see, but that's what Peter predicts for us. In other ways, he's a poor example since it's often pretty hard to find him in the picture. He's not really distinctive enough.

In fact, there are some pictures in this book in which I don't think he does exist at all. Now, we're in the middle of a series of talks on 1 Peter.

We've seen already in previous talks that some of the key verses in this letter are in chapter 2, verses 11 and 12. And let me read those again to you.

Verse 11. Beloved, I urge you as sojourners and exiles to abstain from the passions of the flesh, which wage war against your soul. Keep your conduct among the Gentiles honorable, so that when they speak against you as evildoers, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day of visitation.

[5 : 02] So Peter's instructions are to control the way you live. And the reasons he gives us are for the sake of the spread of the gospel and for God's glory.

And we've seen in the last chapter in some of the talks some more specific instructions on what Christian behavior looks like in relation to authorities, to masters, to work, to our families and to fellow Christians.

Throughout the letter, a repeating theme has been that when you follow Jesus, it's likely to come at a cost. You can expect opposition living as a Christian.

And Bruce last week explored this expectation of suffering. In today's passage, Peter takes us further into what this will look like for each one of us as an individual and how we can support each other in that in the church family.

So we're going to look at the passage in two sections. Verses 1 to 7, which concern our attitude to the world.

[6 : 15] And I've labeled that living distinctively in the world. And then 8 to 11, which show how we live with fellow Christians, living lovingly in the church.

And how this can provide support for us in the way we live in the world. And we live in a culture where there are many pressures.

Pressures to conform. And it's pretty hard to resist those pressures. They can be obvious pressures or they can be quite subtle. If you're in school, there will almost certainly be pressure from those around you to take part in gossip.

Your classmates may use inappropriate language, may look at pornography. They'll want you to be one of the lads, one of the girls. Peer pressure is very strong.

And most of us want to be liked. It's more comfortable to fit in, easier to go with the flow. Peter warns us in verse 3 that if we are following Jesus, this is not for us.

[7 : 17] We should have left this attitude behind. The time is past for doing what the Gentiles do. Now some of the examples here may seem to be at the extreme end.

Drunkenness, orgies, lawless idolatry. And perhaps you're sitting there listening and thinking, I'm okay. I don't go to orgies. I don't get drunk.

I don't break the law. Well, not very often apart from the 20 mile per hour speed limit driving here today. But Peter is just giving us examples relevant to the context of the time.

And some of the pressures for us are much more subtle. So what might this be for you? Pressure to indulge in criticism of other people in your office, gossip at the school gate, in the classroom.

Pressure to go with the world's values, not with God's values. Or falling in with the ways of the world may be responding to other pressures which show your priorities.

[8 : 21] Priorities for a better house, a new car, better schooling for your children. Making these a priority, being drawn in to worldly values. Now the advertising industry relies on our susceptibility to be influenced by the world around us.

To want what the world wants. The newest electronic gadget you must have. You've worked hard. You need that dream holiday. And the slogans feed into it, don't they?

Because you're worth it. Are you? Pamper yourself. Is this so different from the sensuality and the passions that Peter describes here?

And the first part of verse 4 shows us how this pressure builds up. If you don't behave in this way, if you show different values, you will be maligned.

People will criticize you. They'll think you're a bit soft. You're not one of the lads, not one of the crowd. Are you ready for that? Is your relationship with God stronger than your link to all your friends, your relatives?

[9 : 30] This may not just be a response from those whose opinions you don't value. These criticisms may come from good friends, from your brother, your parents, your children. Have you armed yourselves in preparation?

Peter's not telling us to escape by withdrawing from the world. He's saying we need to live in the world, in the flesh, but distinctive. Not conform to its ways. There are lots of good examples, aren't there, of people who've been distinctive, who've resisted the pressure.

Think of people like Eric Liddell in Chariots of Fire, who stuck to his belief that he shouldn't race on Sundays, even though it meant missing his usual race, the Olympics 100 meters, and suffering criticism from those around him.

And Peter himself knows firsthand about this dilemma. He's been there. At Jesus' arrest, we see him taking the easy way out, fitting with the expectations of the crowd, denying Jesus, not being prepared to stand out, to be distinctive, to face the consequences.

That could be us, couldn't it? Certainly could be me. But a few years later, how he's changed. In Acts, we see him standing up before the high priest, saying that he must obey God rather than man.

[10 : 50] And suffering then, not just contempt, but physical suffering, beating, imprisonment. So it isn't easy. Peter knows from his experience.

So he gives us some help in this battle. He reminds us that we've changed. These behaviors for us, or should be, things of the past.

And he reminds us that we have Jesus as an example. Jesus who suffered more than we will ever suffer, and who did it for us, to save us.

Jesus was tempted with the things of this world, offered the whole world by Satan in the wilderness. But he was free from sin. And Peter tells us to arm ourselves with this same way of thinking.

What a role model. We turn to Jesus, confess our sin, and acknowledge our need for his forgiveness. He takes that sin. Not just the sin of the past, but your ongoing and future sin.

[11 : 55] So in this sense, as verse 1 tells us, we have ceased from sin. Not ceased in that we'll never sin again. None of us will achieve that.

But ceased in the sense that our sin has been accounted for. Jesus has taken it all on himself. So our life should have changed. To be living in line with God's will, God's values.

Not the values of this world. So in verse 1, just as Jesus suffered in the flesh, so we need to be ready to do this.

And part of this suffering, for us, will be the worldly reaction to our being a Christian, to being distinctive. Now it probably won't be physical violence. If we were Christians in Syria, in Somalia, this might be violence against our family, or ourselves, or professing our faith might mean we're unable to get a job or a home.

For us, it's more subtle, but it's just as difficult to deal with. It may mean we're not in the popular group at school, shunned by our friends, not invited to the party.

[13 : 06] We may want to be liked, but remember how much more important it is to be loved by God than liked by the world. Verses 5, 6, and 7, then, give us another reason why this is the right course to follow.

Although we may suffer for our actions now, that's nothing compared to the suffering that is to come for those who choose not to follow Jesus. Peter tells us they will have to give account, they will face judgment.

The end of all things is at hand, he tells us in verse 7. Judgment is coming. Not that Peter was necessarily expecting the end to come next day, or that we should.

It may do. But Peter, in his second letter, reminds us that with the Lord, one day is as a thousand years. Peter is telling us that we are in the last days, we're in the last phase of God's plan on earth, while we wait for Jesus' return.

And without the support of Jesus taking our sins, there's no escape from God's judgment when he does return. That's why he tells us the gospel has been preached, and still needs to be preached, to save others from this judgment.

[14 : 29] So the first section is about our attitude to the world. It's about where our heart is. And it draws on some of the earlier sections of the letter.

In chapter 1, we saw the call to be holy as God is holy, to love one another with a pure heart. Here too, there's a change of heart, so that we long for is the will of God, not the next trend, not the pressures all around you in 21st century Dulwich.

Not easy to be distinctive, but we have the encouragement in the example of Jesus, and we have the sure confidence in our eternal future. Verse 7 tells us to follow these instructions for the sake of our prayers.

And we've seen similar pleas from Peter before. In chapter 3, in verses 7 and verse 12, we've seen that our prayers are helped by being faithful to God's word.

So verse 7 gives us another reason to follow Peter's instructions. Our prayers will be helped. And the meaning may be, I think, that we find it easier to pray when our heart is right.

[15 : 41] When we're following God's will more closely, we come closer to God, and our prayers are more acceptable from a pure heart. Now, I often find prayer difficult, but being closer to God's word, being with Christian friends, helps my prayers.

And even that suffering, which Peter tells us is inevitable, can help our prayer too, can't it? As the world seems to turn against us, it's often easier to turn more closely to God in prayer.

So that's the first section, 1 to 7, living distinctively in the world. Now let's look at the second section, verses 8 to 11 in more detail, and see how our relationship with each other, with fellow Christians, can help us in following these instructions in the first seven verses.

Now, verse 8 starts, above all. So we know what follows is going to be really important, something we really have to pay attention to. And here it is, above all, keep loving one another earnestly.

So having talked about our relationship to the world and non-Christians, here's our instruction in relation to other Christians. And it's familiar advice, isn't it? Above all, work hard on your love for each other.

[17 : 05] Peter's told us in chapter 1 to love each other earnestly. So how does this take it further? Well, it sets out some of the details of this relationship.

Verse 8 says, love covers a multitude of sins. Jesus takes on all our sins, so with Jesus as our model, we need to be forgiving to those who may upset us or sin against us.

Not that we should necessarily ignore sin in fellow Christians, it may be right to point it out, but we shouldn't bear grudges against others. Our call is to be forgiving, not resentful.

It's easy for the unity of the church to be damaged by lack of forgiveness. We're called on to under-accuse and to over-forgive, to show an earnest desire for the welfare of others rather than ourselves.

And we're told we need to use our gifts in service to each other. So if our job this week is to serve the coffee or put out the Bibles or play the piano or explain God's word or turn up early and volunteer on Rotor Light, whatever it is, we should do it to the best of our ability because this is a gift that God has given us to use for the benefit of others.

[18 : 27] It's part of God's grace that we have the ability to do these things. And it would be rejecting God's grace not to use them willingly and as well as we can.

Sometimes it's easy to be a bit grudging in our service, isn't it? Yes, you do the job, but this is the third time this month and Jack or Joan, they've only been on the Rotor once and there they are standing chatting while you're getting on with it again.

Can your thinking be like this sometimes? Mine can. Well, here's Peter's response. Do it without grumbling, in love, treasuring God's goodness in allowing you to use your gift.

Verse 9 says to show hospitality without grumbling. There's a story of a religious order where life was devoted to silent prayer and contemplation.

On one day, once a year, one member was allowed to speak one sentence. One year, it was Brother Jonathan's turn. He said, the porridge here is always too hot.

[19 : 34] One year later, a whole year had gone by, Brother Michael was the one to speak and he said, not only is the porridge too hot, it's also lumpy. Another year of silence passed, it was Brother Joseph's turn.

They all waited to see what he'd say and he said, I'm fed up. All I ever hear is grumbling in this place. A silly story, but it illustrates how this grumbling can dwell in our hearts in silence for weeks or months or years.

Often we don't say it out loud, even once a year. It just sits there and it can damage us. So hospitality without grumbling. Maybe offering just to fetch someone a cup of coffee or invite them to lunch.

If through God's grace you're given the resources and the ability to give someone hospitality, then your reward is that you're in a position to use that gift that God has given you. Grumbling is saying, it's all about me.

My comfort is more important than yours. So again, it's a matter of heart, about loving others more than ourselves. A church working in this way as a body of believers supporting each other to live more like Jesus brings glory to God.

[20 : 47] First tense is, use your gifts in this way in order that everything, God may be glorified through Jesus Christ. So this is what the church should be like, supporting each other, serving each other from a loving heart.

Here's the contrast to the first section of today's passage. The surprise of non-believers who see you're distinct, the malign responses of those who see you not going with the values of this world, contrasted with the love, the support, the forgiveness of the church family.

It's so important that this happens that we immerse ourselves in the church family to encourage each other, to strengthen each other, to live the life set out in verses 1-7, to follow the example of Jesus.

It means giving and it means being prepared to receive love from those around you. So if you're here as a non-Christian today, is this an attractive proposition for you?

Rejection? Mockery from friends and from the world? But the protection of a Christian family that loves you earnestly and a God that loves you absolutely and loves his people so much that he sent his son to die so that our sins might be forgiven and so that we might be judged righteous at the end of all things.

[22 : 18] So to conclude, if somebody looks at a page of your life, will they pick you up as distinctive, different, just like Wally? If you live as a Christian, distinctive, as Peter sets out in this passage, what can you expect?

Well, three things Peter tells us. First, expect ridicule and mockery from the world. Second, expect earnest love from fellow believers.

And thirdly, and most importantly, expect rescue and unconditional love from God for eternity as you experience God's glory. So perhaps a bit of mockery now and again for a while shouldn't be too much to bear in comparison with these rewards.

Let me just pray for us as we finish and then we'll tell you what we're going to do with the groups. Lord, help us to take your word to heart for our hearts to be changed, for us to stand up for you and to love each other earnestly and without grudge.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.