

The uniqueness of the exiles part 1

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[0 : 00] So as we stand, let's pray together. Father, we come to your word now. Word given by you, the ancient of days, the one who is unchanging and always true.

! We're in 1 Peter chapter 2, passage Ruth read for us earlier on, verses 11 to 25.

I listened to a podcast the other day on the Speak Life channel. It's worth following if you don't do that already. And Glenn there was speaking about some of the obstacles in Christians witnessing effectively and so to see people coming to faith.

And he said something that really struck me. He said this. One of the biggest problems we have is that Christians aren't weird enough. Looking around this morning, you may think that isn't true here. But the problem, he said, is that Christians aren't weird enough. Well, what did he mean by that? Well, apart from the fact that we tend to be at church on Sunday mornings, the lives of many Christians in the West, and it's certainly true in the UK, are so much like our neighbours, that should we ever get around to speaking clearly about Jesus, the words of the gospel seem to come so much out of the blue.

[1 : 38] Until that point, we look like them, we sound like them, our lives are similar, we have the same kind of aspirations and values. Maybe we chat over the garden fence about the same kind of subjects, and then suddenly, out of nowhere, we mention Jesus.

And it's like one of those old cowboy films where you suddenly, when everything stops, and one of those tumbleweeds blows across. Ah, something's changed.

See, without a lifestyle that looks and sounds different to our neighbours, the weirdness of the gospel message, because, let's say, it is strange to the ears of the world, well, that just leaves our neighbours flummoxed.

What's more, it makes it sound as if our faith is just an eccentric hobby, like the guy down the street who spends all his time building model railways, or the lady further down the road who likes collecting strange garden gnomes.

Well, you know, if that's your thing, that's okay. Just, please, don't involve me in it. No, the speaker went on to say that to be effective in sharing the words of our faith, our lives need to look different.

[2 : 47] We need to be weird people, to some extent anyway, if people are to hear the weird words of Jesus. But Peter's call to a unique life, a weird looking life, a life that stands out, isn't just an evangelistic strategy.

He's not just, he's not simply saying, do this, and your witness will be better. No, it's a call to be authentically Christian, to live as the people we truly are.

We get a reminder of that in the first verse of our reading, don't we? Peter says, you are foreigners and exiles. But it builds on all that Peter has been teaching us earlier in this letter up until this point. We are aliens and foreigners in this world. We don't really belong here. Our real home is with Christ in the new creation. That was the subject of that wonderful reading from John chapter 14.

And as those who have been called and saved and adopted into God's family, we are called now, here in this world, to live out the values of our true home, to live in ways that honour our true king as we wait to be physically united to Jesus upon his return.

[3 : 57] And that means we are to be joyful even in our suffering. We're to be hopeful when everything looks gloomy. We're to be holy and loving despite the tests and trials that come.

That means we're to turn away from sin and deceit and grow up, as we heard last week, grow up in the gospel, into the character of Jesus, becoming the chosen people, the royal priesthood, the holy nation, that we are already through Christ.

And so having laid the foundations of that new identity and calling, Peter is going to spend the rest of the letter explaining what that new and distinctly Christian lifestyle should look like and giving us

some more justifications to help us live that out.

That's why we've called these next two talks the uniqueness of the exiles. Actually, if I'd heard the podcast before I'd written that title, I might have called them the weirdness of the exiles.

Because if we live out the things the Apostle Peter talks about here, we will look weird and we will look odd and we will stand out. And that's okay. That's okay.

[5 : 02] We shouldn't be frightened of that. Because then our lifestyle will match our theology and there'll be less reason for our friends and neighbours to think that speaking about Jesus is weird.

Well, actually, it makes perfect sense of how I'm seeing you live. The message now fits with what your life looks like. They will understand why we've been acting weirdly all along. So what does Peter tell us?

Well, four things. Firstly, we're to fight the war within so that we live godly lives. Secondly, we're to be loyal, humble citizens no matter who is in power.

Thirdly, we're to be good, patient, hard-working employees no matter how bad our boss might be. And lastly, and we'll think more about this next week as well, we're to be Christ-like.

We're to live and love and endure like Jesus. I'm going to talk you through each of those four things. Firstly, though, fight the war within so that you live godly lives.

[6 : 03] I've met people, I'm sure you have too, who have an outward appearance of piety in Christian living, but whose characters are far from that. They are selfish and cruel and deceitful.

And whose private morals are light years away from the image they're trying to present. Some of those cases hit the headlines, some of them ruin churches and break up marriages, some people turn away from Jesus because they see these so-called Christians living ways that are so unlike Jesus it just puts them off.

Well, Peter isn't interested in Christians living that kind of life. He doesn't tell his readers to put on a Christian facade and just pretend. He tells them to fight the war within so that our inner lives match up with what people see out there.

Because we all do face that battle within. Sinful desires to have our own way, a desire to ignore God's commands, to do and say things that we know are wrong.

Well, those things don't suddenly disappear when we become Christians. We're not battling with sin before we're a Christian and now, hey, I'm just holy in everything I do and think. No, no. Those battles stay with us right through life no matter how mature we might get to in our Christian faith and they stay there until we meet Jesus.

[7 : 27] And on that day we will be made perfect. But until then there is a battle to fight. And if we seek to appease these desires within or excuse them or downplay the importance, sin claims a foothold in our lives and it draws us away from Jesus.

So brothers and sisters, in your own heart this morning, in my heart as well, there is a battle to be fought. There is a war to be won within our hearts and souls if we are then to go and live godly lives. It's rather strong language, isn't it? Battles, fights, wars. But Peter isn't alone in that. Colossians 3, Paul makes the same point. He says, when Christ who is your life appears then you will also appear with him in glory.

Therefore, put to death now whatever belongs to your earthly nature. Sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires, greed, which is idolatry. Later in the chapter Peter will explain that those in the world will not understand why we don't join with them in their sinful lives, why we don't carry on in wild abandon, why we won't get drunk, why we won't treat sex as a recreational activity, why we will give sacrificially and so deny ourselves pleasures and possessions, why we will forgive willingly those who hurt us, whilst we will find joy in service and suffering, whilst we will go out of our way to spend time with people who are different from us, whilst we are willing to give hospitality to those who can't or won't offer it back.

And as the world looks on these kind of things, it will say, gosh, that's strange. What a weird way to live. And sometimes they may think, actually, because you're not joining in with us, you're the ones that are evil.

[9 : 19] They will think that we are judging and condemning them by our unwillingness to live as they do. That kind of reaction towards Christians seeking to do good and live holy lives is not unusual, actually.

It comes out of the blue sometimes. It's sometimes hard to face and endure, but it isn't unusual. And whatever our age, peer pressure can be a powerful force.

So we must be resolved. Unless we take our sin seriously, it will win. Our lives will not stand out as good. Not that the good we do will always be seen as good.

Jesus had that problem, didn't he? The one man who has always lived a perfect life, well, he faced more criticism for his lifestyle than you or I will ever do. He was criticised for the people he hung out with, tax collectors, drunkards, former prostitutes.

He was criticised for healing on the Sabbath, even though he was living out God's kingdom values as he did so. In the early church, the early Christians were often singled out for their weird lifestyle.

[10:25] The Roman historian Tacitus said that Christians were loathed because of their abominations. Abominations! Because they shared hospitality.

Because they loved one another. Because they shared their possessions. Because they celebrated the Lord's Supper. Abominations! And yet, Peter says, the truth will out.

One day, the goodness of true obedience to Christ will be seen. It will be seen on the day God visits us. Now, that might be at the end of time when Jesus comes again and finally people are able to see everything clearly and go, ah, yeah, that's how I should have been living.

Could be, perhaps, those days when the Spirit comes in times of revival and people who have rejected a Christian lifestyle and rejected Christ suddenly have their eyes open and they're able to say, ah, there is the glory of Christ shining out through that person.

I want that. But one day, the truth will out. In the meantime, if we are to live a unique, weird, standout, Christ-like life, it starts with taking that battle within seriously.

[11:40] We must fight the war within if we are to live godly lives. So how's that going with you? Are there places where you give in to fit in?

Are there places where, contrary to the commands of God, you live and act just like those who do not know Jesus? If we are to live godly lives, we must make war against those sinful desires that would lead us away from Jesus and diminish our witness.

That's the first thing, that battle within. Then Peter gets very practical. Two practical lessons here, one in the talk next week. And the first one is this, we must be humble, loyal citizens no matter who is in power.

It used to be said that it was rather impolite for your English to talk about money or religion or politics. That is not the case anymore, is it? Everyone has an opinion about politics, everyone is a critic, we can all wax lyrical about everything that's wrong with the country and what we want to do to put it all right.

And I'm not sure there's necessarily anything wrong with expressing those kind of opinions. As Christians we're supposed to have clear moral compasses. But verses 13 to 17 set some boundaries for us, which despite living in a liberal democracy we might find rather challenging.

[13:06] So take verse 17, show proper respect to everyone, love the family of believers, fear God, honour the emperor. Now we don't have an emperor, but you know what's going on here, don't you?

Honour the king, honour the prime minister, honour those who have those positions of authority. So I wonder, does the way you speak about our current political leaders or perhaps even leaders of other nations, not mentioning any names at the moment, does it meet that test?

Do we speak about them as someone who has been appointed to that position by God? Do we speak about them with honour? Is their authority something we begrudge?

A shackle we'd rather throw off? An authority actually we'd like to usurp. As people are we deliberately pushing the boundaries? Do you see a sign that says walk on the grass and you go stuff it, I'm going on there?

Do the speed limits come as optional extras if you're driving? Are you content to take part in protests that go outside of the rule of law?

[14:15] Again, the phrase Peter uses here is about doing good, meaning keeping the laws of the land. So those in authority have no reason to quarrel with Christians.

See, according to Peter, as Christians, we should be moral citizens, using our freedom for good, not for evil, living as God's slaves, where all we do is for him and where our lives are lived according to his words.

And remember, Peter is not blind about the persecution or hardships that Christians of his day faced. He's mentioned that already, and yet he still says, it doesn't matter who your leaders are, behave like this.

And if Peter was able to call the disciples in his day to humble themselves in such a way, well, living in a democracy where we get to overthrow the government peacefully every five years or so, well, we should find his instructions far less onerous.

But it is a challenge, isn't it? It is a challenge. Now, I haven't got time now to talk about how we might react when laws prohibit things that the Bible commands, whether it's gathering together or speaking of Jesus, or to discuss either whether it's right to break a law in order to change an unjust law.

[15 : 36] Maybe that's a topic for over coffee. But even those things, I think, need to sit underneath Peter command here for all Christians to seek to be humble, loyal, Christ-honouring, good-doing citizens.

Ungodly ends cannot be used to justify the means. Sorry, that's the wrong way around. Ungodly means cannot be used to justify the ends.

So where is the challenge for you here? Is the way you speak about our government and other world leaders godly and honouring? Are there ways, actually, when you think about the laws of the land where you seek to overturn or ignore their God-given authority?

Does your life really show in word and deed that Jesus is your king? Does your fear of God lead you to honour the king and his government?

things? Something to mull over this week when we think about the news. Well, if that was hard for the free people of Peter's day, who had emperors like Nero and Caligula to deal with, and they were no picnic, then what about those under the yoke of slavery?

[16 : 50] Does Peter have a get out clause for them? Well, no, he doesn't. They were to be good, patient, hard-working, no matter how bad their master might have been.

Now, it's worth reminding ourselves at this point that slavery in the Middle East 2,000 years ago was vastly different from the chattel slavery that took millions of Africans from their homes to the plantations in the Americas.

Most slaves in the time of Peter and the early church had great freedom in their lives. Many rose to positions of power and wealth and responsibility. That slavery in most cases was more like indentured servanthood, where the poor who had nowhere else to go, no welfare state to look after them, would enslave themselves voluntarily to others in exchange for bed and board and other comforts.

There was security there. I'll be your slave, you give me this. But whilst many slaves fared fairly well under this system, it also meant that many slaves did end up with terrible, if not downright wicked masters.

So this isn't an easy command for Peter to give, is it? He knew how just hard it would be. Now if we're honest, we don't. Sometimes we can still end up working for terrible, mean-spirited, harsh and overbearing bosses.

[18 : 14] I've had bosses like that, maybe you have as well. The difference is of course that we can apply for another job. We can go somewhere else. I can't imagine what it would be like to be enslaved to someone who was cruel and vindictive and violent where there was no means of escape.

But again, Peter doesn't tell the slaves, or us as employees now, that faced with an unjust boss, we're to throw off the shackles to fight back, to insist on fair treatment and proper compensation, and to stop doing anything in terms of our work until we get that.

Now what does he say? Work hard, be loyal, be honest, be obedient. And if despite you being this kind of slave or employee, you still get treated badly, endure your mistreatment patiently, even when it's undeserved.

We'll come on to Peter's reason for that in a moment. Can you see how weird that will look? In the same way try to speak about certain world leaders in an honouring way because of their God-given authority at the moment, a life like this where we patiently endure unjust treatment is going to look weird.

Because we instinctively know that this kind of mistreatment that Peter describes here is wrong. We know that. Faced with that, you'd want to hit back. You'd want to get even.

[19 : 45] At the very least, you'd want to pay that master back or employer back with poor effort and constant grumbling. Well, if you think I'm going to work any extra overtime for you, you've got another thing coming.

