

Live Honorable Lives

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[0 : 0 0] Good morning, church. It's good to see you all this morning. Our sermon text today is in the book of 1 Peter, chapter 2, verses 11 and 12. That's page 954 in the Pew Bible, and we'll have it on the screen as well if you want to look at it there. We're looking at a short text today, just two verses, but these two verses are something like Peter's thesis statement for the whole letter, so we're going to take a close look at them together. As you turn there, let me pray for us, and then I'll read. Let's go to the Lord together in prayer. Father, as we come before you in the quiet of our hearts now and together gathered as your people, Lord, we remember your promise that you have sent your Spirit to come and live in us and dwell in us and open our eyes to the beauty of your Word and to remember again our Lord Jesus and, Father, in seeing Him and in worshiping Him to become more like Him. Lord, help us to trust you and to trust your Word.

Lord, we pray this in the name of Jesus. Amen. All right, 1 Peter, chapter 2, verses 11 and 12. Peter writes this. He says, 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.

Well, so last week, Pastor Matt mentioned that being a Christian is a lot like being a foreigner in a different country. Sometimes being a foreigner can be a funny or an awkward experience. You know, you kind of say the wrong things at the wrong time. You sort of wear the wrong clothes to the wrong events. You feel a little dislocated, sometimes a little embarrassed. You know, maybe you felt that way traveling to a foreign country. I remember traveling to Missouri a number of years ago, which can feel a bit like a foreign country if you're from the Northeast, traveling all the way to the Midwest. And Beth and I were picking up some food from the grocery store, and we had brought a cookbook from home so we could remember which ingredients we had to pick up. And in the checkout line, as we're checking out, the cashier said to us, you better leave that cookbook here. And immediately, we took offense. We thought she was accusing us of stealing this cookbook from the magazine aisle. We're like, no, no, we brought this from home. We did not steal this. Then she said, yeah, I know. I was saying you better leave it here so we can all take a look at those great recipes back in the break room. Turns out she was being nice. We're from New England. People you don't know aren't supposed to be nice to you. Well, thankfully, that is often our experience of being foreigners. It's a little awkward. It's a little funny. But, you know, that's not always the case, is it? Sometimes being a foreigner isn't merely an awkward experience. Sometimes being a foreigner is a dangerous experience. You're viewed with suspicion. You're seen as a threat. You're vulnerable.

Sometimes you're not greeted with hospitality, but with hostility. Now, Peter is writing to a group of first-century Christians who are experiencing just that kind of reality. But their position, you see, their status as foreigners isn't because they've moved far from home to a strange land among strange people. No, they've actually become foreigners right in their own hometown. In the very place where they used to be accepted, in the very place where they used to be protected, now they're strangers and foreigners. They're sojourners and exiles. Hospitality has turned into hostility. Why? Why has this happened? Well, because of their new allegiance to Jesus as Lord.

[4 : 1 8] Imagine, imagine being a new Christian going to dinner in the first century. You know, they get the invite. They head to their neighbor's home. Friends, perhaps, they've known for years. And as they walk in the door and the dinner's about to begin, their host says, hey, let's bow and say a prayer to our household God together. You know, this meat that we're going to eat has been sacrificed in their honor.

And suddenly, the Christian doesn't bow. And they can't in good conscience eat the meal. I'm sorry, they say, but I cannot. Why? Well, because they've come to believe that Jesus alone is Lord, and allegiance to him means forsaking all other gods. So suddenly, socially, they're on the outside. But it's not just at the dinner table. It's out in the public square. Christians aren't going to the temples anymore. They're not going to the spas or the baths anymore. They've become completely out of step with the culture around them. And that didn't just make them strange. It made them offensive.

So they weren't accepted, and they weren't liked. They were reviled. Many times, being a Christian wasn't seen as merely neutral. It was increasingly seen as negative.

It was bad. Now, I don't know about you, but I think we're feeling a similar shift in some ways today, aren't we? To be a follower of Jesus, to hold to the historic faith in Christ, isn't just viewed as neutral, but negative. Christians are characterized increasingly as exclusive or intolerant or unloving or narrow-minded.

[6 : 00] So how does Peter counsel us, then, in this kind of context, to live? When the culture we live in isn't just neutral, but hostile. When being a Christian isn't just seen as unpopular, but deeply problematic.

How do we live? Well, Peter's going to tell us in these short couple of verses to do three things. And we can state these three things briefly, and then we're going to unpack them in the rest of our time together. And the three things he tells us is, he tells us to abstain, and then he tells us to maintain, and then he tells us to remember who you are. Abstain, maintain, and remember who you are.

So let's look at those three things. First, he says abstain. Look again at verse 11. Beloved, I urge you as sojourners and exiles to abstain from the passions of the flesh, which wage war against your soul. So first, Peter's saying, in a context of hostility to being a Christian, abstain from sinful passions. Now, let's talk for just a second about what Peter means by passions of the flesh. First off, this term, passions of the flesh, it doesn't just refer to, you know, things like sexual sins or drunkenness. Actually, you know, when the New Testament talks about the flesh, that's a bit of a technical term that's talking about our sinful nature as a whole.

It's that part of us that's self-centered and self-gratifying rather than God-centered and God-gratifying. Yes, at times it can look like lust or drunkenness, but it can also look like self-pity. It can also look like envy. It can also look like slander. Now, when someone becomes a Christian, when someone turns from trusting in themselves and trusting in Christ, they're given a new spiritual nature. As Peter has mentioned multiple times in this letter so far, Christians are those who've been born again or born anew through the resurrection of Jesus from the dead. So that means if you are a Christian, you're no longer ruled or dominated by that old sinful nature. It's not the operating system of your life anymore. Your life used to run on self-centeredness and self-gratification. Even the good things that we used to do were done to get praise or get significance or to look good, but not anymore. The Spirit has come and has given us, given you a new operating system, one that's God-centered and God-gratifying. You delight to do good now for God's sake. But even though you have this new operating system, in this life, our old sinful nature, it still remains there. You know, it's sort of like getting a brand new furnace in your home.

[8 : 46] You know, you get this brand new furnace. It's this new energy-efficient beauty that saves you a ton of money. It's really good for the environment. But there in your basement, that old boiler is still there. And if you wanted to, you could always go down, fire that thing up, and burn some oil if you wanted to.

So here's what Peter wants to tell us. He says, when the pressure is on, when you're facing rejection or hostility as a follower of Jesus, don't let the passions of your old sinful nature take control.

Don't go down in the basement and fire up the old boiler. And we need to hear Peter's exhortation, don't we? Isn't it easy when you're feeling ostracized or rejected to respond by indulging those self-centered and self-gratifying desires of the old nature?

You know, sometimes when we're feeling rejected or feeling ostracized or feeling under pressure, you know, sometimes we turn back to those old desires to just escape, to get comfort when we're feeling rejected. Sometimes we do it, we turn back to those old ways to fit in and avoid the rejection, to be accepted and liked by our peers.

Sometimes we do it to get even. We indulge our anger or our frustration. We cut people down and we ridicule them in return. But Peter says, beloved, abstain. Abstain, he says.

[10 : 24] Don't you see these old passions? He says, they wage war against your soul. They're like a cancer eating you from the inside out. So don't indulge them at all for one minute. Be vigilant. Be active.

And notice Peter says, abstain even from the passions, even from the desires of the old nature, the thoughts, the inclinations, the feelings. Don't harbor them. Don't foster them, he says.

You know, how many times when we've been ridiculed or mistreated, do we kind of run through in our minds all the maybe angry things we'd like to say back in return and how we'd win all the arguments and prove ourselves and belittle them like they've belittled us. And we nurse these thoughts and passions over in our minds and in our hearts. And, you know, we think, no, I'd never say those things out loud. I'd never actually act on them. But we still kind of let them fester up inside.

But Peter says, don't you see, even harboring and fostering those desires, those feelings, feelings. It's warring against your own soul, your precious eternal soul that Christ loves and died for. So when the pressure mounts and when you're facing hostility for being a Christian, when you're tempted to go back to the old nature, abstain, Peter says. Don't go back and fire up that old boiler. Put on the brakes in your mind, in your heart. Don't even let the desires or thoughts rest.

Shoo them away. Do it for the sake of your own soul, Peter says. Okay, but Peter doesn't stop there. He doesn't just tell us to abstain. He goes on to tell us to maintain. Look at verse 12. Verse 12, he says, 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. So in a context of hostility to being a Christian, Peter says second, maintain, keep, maintain your conduct. Keep it honorable. Now, so much of what Peter is going to do in the coming sections of this letter is to show us practically what this looks like in real time and in real life situations.

[12 : 39] He's going to go on to speak about citizens and rulers, our civic life. He's going to go on to talk about servants and masters. He's going to go on to talk about husbands and wives. And then he's going to go on to talk about all of us as we live in the midst of our unbelieving neighbors and co-workers and family members. And as Peter kind of gets into the details in these coming sections, some of these topics are going to be tricky. They're going to be tough. Peter's instructions for us that we're going to look at in the coming weeks, they're full of countercultural principles and approaches.

Some of what he says to us might seem odd. Some of what he says to us might even feel a little offensive. Now, over the next few weeks, starting next Sunday, after the sermons, we're actually going to have some time for question and answer and discussion after the service downstairs in the lower level meeting room. So what we're going to do in these coming weeks as we dive into the practical things that Peter's going to talk to us about, we're going to see what he has to say in the sermon during the service, and then we can talk about it afterwards if you'd like. So starting next week, if you want to come, leave a little extra time after the service to come. We'll talk a little bit more in detail about some of Peter's instructions after the sermon, do some Q&A; do some discussion. That's starting next week. But here in our text this morning, Peter's giving us, as it is, the general principle, the general principle is keep your conduct honorable. Keep living lives of good deeds. Keep pursuing what is good, even when you're being spoken against as evildoers.

Why? Well, you know, Peter on the one hand said, hey, abstain from sinful passions for the sake of your own soul. It's like tearing you apart. But here he says, keep living honorable lives for the sake of your neighbors. The very ones who are speaking against you as evildoers, do it for their sakes. Why? He says that they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day of visitation. Now, what exactly does Peter have in mind here? What does it mean to glorify God on the day of visitation? So let's pause and think about that phrase for just a second. Well, this phrase, the day of visitation or a day of visitation, that can refer in Scripture to God coming in judgment.

But it can also refer to God coming in salvation. When God visits, it can be to visit in judgment or to visit in salvation. You see one of those moments of salvation in Luke chapter 1. Remember Zachariah's song that we looked at a couple weeks ago in the Christmas season? Zachariah said, blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for he has visited and redeemed his people. So when we're thinking about God's day of visitation, we have to sort of look at the context to know whether Peter's talking about judgment here or talking about salvation. So what does the context have to tell us?

Well, it's interesting this verb glorify, glorify God. That verb glorify occurs something like 60 times in the New Testament, and it's never used to speak of unbelievers who are forced unwillingly to admit

that God or his people have been in the right. Just the opposite. Almost always glorifying God is a positive thing that's done unwillingly. So when Peter says that some people will glorify God on the day of visitation, he seems to be talking about unbelievers becoming believers in salvation. He seems to be saying that some of those who used to revile Christians will see their good works, and God will then use that to their conversion. They will turn and be saved and believe the gospel and give glory to God.

[16:30] Now, we can tell we're on the right track with that reading because Peter says the exact same thing about unbelieving husbands, as he's going to, in the next couple of sections, he's going to start talking about husbands and wives. And in chapter 3, verses 1 and 2, he's going to talk about unbelieving husbands, and he says that some unbelieving husbands will be one to the faith when they see the good conduct of their believing wives.

So for Peter, keeping our conduct honorable, even when people revile us, it's all about mission. It's all about doing it for our neighbor's sake, for the glory of God.

It's about people seeing our good deeds and giving glory to our Father in heaven, as Jesus himself taught in the Sermon on the Mount that Kim read for us earlier in the service. We want to maintain lives of honor and good works, of love and charity, of patience and kindness, of sacrificial generosity and love, so that some might see these good works and perhaps might come to truly glorify God in Jesus Christ, even though right now they don't get it, and even though right now they might speak against us.

Now, stepping back from these two commands in verses 11 and 12 and, you know, kind of taking them both in together, you start to see how kind of countercultural this all is, don't you?

Peter's saying, look, sometimes when your culture's hating you for following Jesus, he says, do you know who your biggest enemy is? It's your own sinful nature.

[18:07] That's where the real battle is. That's the real danger zone. And do you know who you need to think about the most when you do good and live honorable lives? Do you know who you should be doing that for? For the very people who revile you and speak against you.

Do it for their sake, for their good. Now, that's totally upside down, isn't it? I mean, think about it. When someone attacks you or slanders you or makes false allegations against you, what's your natural response?

Your natural response is to think, well, they're the real problem. And I'm going to start doing good just for my own sake. But Peter says, no, that's not how you're supposed to operate. You need to see that the real battle's inside yourselves.

That's how you respond. And you must turn and do good for their sake so that they might be saved. How in the world do we get to that place?

That completely upside down, inside out approach to living life that's so strange and so foreign. Well, that brings us to the last point that Peter makes in this text.

[19:10] And he makes it briefly. Almost, it feels like in passing. But he makes it all the same. And it's found in the very first word of verse 11. When he calls us beloved.

Beloved. And with that word, Peter's saying, remember who you are, church. In a context of hostility to being a believer, Peter says, remember who you are.

You're not just beloved to me, your apostle, Peter is saying. But more importantly, you're beloved by God. Peter actually begins each of the two main sections of his letter in this way.

The first one's here in chapter 2, verse 11, which kind of launches Peter into the first main section of his letter. And then it happens again in chapter 4, verse 12, where Peter kind of launches into the second main part of the body of this letter.

He begins each section by calling them beloved. And then he actually ends each of those two sections in chapter 4, verse 11, in chapter 5, verse 11, with a doxology.

[20:16] To him be glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen. And then in 5:11, to him be dominion forever and ever. Amen. So you see, Peter's letter has this beautiful structure. Beginning by calling us and reminding us that we're God's beloved.

And ending in the glory of our Lord Jesus. Now, why does Peter want to start each of his main sections with this reminder of who we are?

Because when we lose sight of who we are as God's beloved, we lose our bearings to everything else. God's love, friends, is the thing that keeps us from indulging sinful passions in the midst of trials.

When we're hurt or lonely or angry or afraid. God's love is the thing that keeps us from giving up the often hard work of doing good.

When it's costly, when we feel like we're not making a difference. God's love is the thing that helps us to see that even though our neighbors revile us and speak evil against us, they too are made in God's image.

[21 : 22] And they too can know the same grace that God has given us in Christ. God's love is the thing that keeps us rooted and grounded in all of these realities. But it's not just a sort of idea or a sort of intellectual knowledge of God's love in general.

It's not just saying, yes, God is a loving God. But it's knowing God's love personally to you. It's experiencing yourself as God's beloved. Because there's a difference, right, between saying, yes, God is love and saying, he loves me.

And do you remember, do you remember, isn't this how Jesus' ministry began? Jesus was about to begin his earthly ministry. He was about to do good works of mighty power that would bring many people to faith.

He was about to wage war against sin and death itself. He was about to face rejection and hostility. And how did his public ministry begin?

Well, it began at his baptism when the heavens were opened and the spirit descended like a dove. And the father said from heaven, this is my son, the beloved.

[22 : 42] The beloved. The whole of Jesus' ministry was taken up under this banner of God's beloved son. And friends, the good news of Christianity is that the whole of our lives can be lived under that same banner.

Because at the heart of Christianity is the message that what Jesus did, he did for us. So that what's true of him can be true for us.

What did Jesus do? Well, Jesus lived and died and rose again. And the good news is he did that for us. He lived a perfect life for you. And he died to pay sin's penalty for you.

And he rose again to conquer the grave for you. So that now what's true of him can be true for you. So that by placing your trust in Christ, his perfect life can be credited to you.

And his sin-bearing death can take away your guilt before God. And so that his eternal resurrection life can be yours now and forever. And the wonderful news is the banner over it all when you're united to Christ by faith is that the Father speaks over you the very same words he spoke over Jesus.

[23 : 53] You are my beloved. With you, I'm well pleased. And that's where it all begins.

Knowing that we're God's beloved. You see, we don't abstain from the passions of our sinful nature alone or in our own strength. We never could.

But we can as God's beloved children. And we don't maintain honorable lives among our neighbors alone or in our own strength.

We do it as his beloved. United to our Savior through the Holy Spirit dwelling in us. So we may be foreigners and sojourners and exiles in this age.

And as foreigners, we may be reviled and spoken against as evildoers. But that does not change how God sees his church. He looks upon his people, his bride, and he calls you.

[24 : 55] He calls us his beloved. And as his beloved, we have this mission. To live among the nations. To live good, honorable lives.

So that even if we're spoken against by God's power, some will see our good works, hear the good news, and come to glorify God and praise him on the last day.

Let's pray together. Father, what a high and holy calling it is to live honorable lives in the midst of this world.

So that our good deeds can resound to your glory through the life of those who come to know Jesus through our witness.

Lord, we think about that and we say, Who is sufficient for these things? We think about all the ways in which we fall short each day to live up to that calling.

[26 : 02] But Jesus, thank you that you said that the kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed. That even these small acts of kindness and faith can grow into mighty oaks, mighty trees.

Thank you for the gift of your spirit, Father, who continues to live and dwell in us. So that we might live as the people you've called us to be. We pray all this in the name of Jesus.

Amen.