

Strangers and Aliens

It is easy to be a Christian when things are going well and not so easy to be a Christian when things are chaotic and difficult, especially when we are being persecuted because of our faith. This is the circumstance Peter addresses in his first epistle; in our text today he gives the new Gentile Asian Christians four key principles by which they are to live their lives in a hostile world.

1 Peter 2:11-25

Beloved, I urge you as sojourners and exiles to abstain from the passions of the flesh, which wage war against your soul. **12** 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.

Submission to Authority

13 Be subject for the Lord's sake to every human institution, whether it be to the emperor as supreme, **14** or to governors as sent by him to punish those who do evil and to praise those who do good. **15** For this is the will of God, that by doing good you should put to silence the ignorance of foolish people. **16** Live as people who are free, not using your freedom as a cover-up for evil, but living as servants of God. **17** Honor everyone. Love the brotherhood. Fear God. Honor the emperor. **18** Servants, be subject to your masters with all respect, not only to the good and gentle but also to the unjust. **19** For this is a gracious thing, when, mindful of God, one endures sorrows while suffering unjustly. **20** For what credit is it if, when you sin and are beaten for it, you endure? But if when you do good and suffer for it you endure, this is a gracious thing in the sight of God. **21** For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you might follow in his steps. **22** He committed no sin, neither was deceit found in his mouth. **23** When he was reviled, he did not revile in return; when he suffered, he did not threaten, but continued entrusting himself to him who judges justly. **24** He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. By his wounds you have been healed. **25** For you were straying like sheep, but have now returned to the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls.

I. You have a new identity (vs. 11a)

Notice in this text that Peter calls the Asian Christians “beloved.” This is the most important thing that can be said about us as Christians: we are loved by our Father in heaven. Peter also says that they are “sojourners and exiles.” It is necessary that we remember that we are passing through this world to the new heavens and the new earth (see Genesis 23 and Psalm 39 in which Abraham and David describe themselves as aliens).

II. We have a new obligation (vs. 11a, 12)

Peter says that we are not to be quiet or passive but rather that we are to engage the world around us. First of all, negatively: we are to abstain from fleshly lusts, because these very lusts wage war against our souls. When one becomes a Christian, he/she becomes a warrior. One cannot successfully lead the Christian life without engaging conflict 24/7. Secondly, Peter says we have an obligation to conduct ourselves in an honorable/lovely/good way, that those pagans around us may glorify God on the Day of Visitation. We are to display the loveliness of the Christian life even to those who are persecuting us. So even if we were to be martyred, we continue to bless the Lord and those who persecute us.

III. We have a new strategy (vv. 13-20)

One might think that now that we are instructed to engage the world, we can do so any way we please. Additionally, as American Protestants, our political and religious background is based on revolution (remembered on July 4 and October 31). Peter, however, says that we are to engage the hostile world in a particular way, namely by submitting ourselves to every proper human authority. This is contrary to our nature. Pride leads us to rebellion, not to submission.

Peter is writing to folks who are being oppressed by a hostile government, sometimes hostile masters at work, and hostile unbelieving husbands whose wives have become Christians. We address the first two of these circumstances in our text today.

Peter explains that we are to submit ourselves even to unjust governors. This would include presidents, governors, mayors, police, schoolteachers, and anyone else in proper authority over us. We all have authorities who rule over us, and it is our obligation to look for ways to submit, without violating our conscience (we remember that there are moments when we must disobey civil authorities, as Peter did when preaching the Gospel).

Peter also mentions the workplace and says that we must subject ourselves to our masters with all respect, regardless of their behavior toward us. Paul explains in I Corinthians 7 that we are free to find better work if possible, but, meanwhile, we must submit ourselves cheerfully to those who are over us in the moment. The main reasons are to be found in verses 15-17.

IV. We have a new motivation (vv. 21-25)

It is not enough for us simply to submit but we must do so being mindful of God and of our calling to follow Christ. Peter uses the word “called” in several places (1:15; 2:9; 3:9; 5:10). There’s a calling upon our lives to suffer just as there is a calling on our lives to glory. The ultimate motive for our suffering through submission to abusive leadership is that we are thereby imitating Jesus Christ. He had no sin. He had no deceit. He did not retaliate. He was no coward when it came time for Him to lay down His life for us. We were ultimately saved by His submission; therefore, we are quick to submit ourselves out of love for Him.

Discussion Questions

1. In verse 11 Peter describes our new identity as sojourners and exiles. In what ways should this identity change the way we conduct ourselves in the world?
2. In verses 11-12, Peter describes the new obligations of a Christian. How do these obligations distinguish us from the unbelieving world? What effect does our new conduct have in the world and with God?
3. How is the Christian distinctive from the unbeliever in his/her approach to social and political reform?
4. In what circumstances should the Christian disobey human authority that is placed over us?
5. What is the Christian’s motives for his/her submission to authority?

Going Deeper

1. What are the ways in which you struggle to abstain from sinful passions and to conduct yourself honorably before unbelievers? What steps can you take to grow in these areas?
2. In what circumstances do you most often struggle in submitting to proper authority in your life? How can you grow in this area?