

1 PETER 2:11-25 LIVE SUCH GOOD LIVES AMONG THE PAGANS THAT...

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Library Bible Study

That they may see your good deeds..

- “something immigrants are entitled to.”
- “Even mild dissent against the status quo would be met with sharp condemnations.”
- “Statistics were generated more by ideology than science to bully people.”
- In the riots over 9000 police cars were burned.
- Cleavage in the world was between belief and unbelief... so JP sought dialogue, but Benedict did not agree. (decades later)

1 Peter 2:11–20

5. Live as the people of God II: The new lifestyle

1. The new lifestyle's pattern: freedom in bondage (2:11–17)

Peter moves to a surprising and urgent application of the teaching he has just given. He has been emphasizing the status that Christians have as the people of God, chosen by him and drawn into privileged fellowship. They are a priestly nation, the recipients of God's grace and favour.

But why should Peter remind them of their status? To be sure, he would have them exercise their priesthood in praising the Lord who bought them; but he has another reason. He would prepare them for lowly service. Just because they are God's royal people they can be servants. The example of Jesus is already before Peter, although he does not yet mention it directly. Knowing who he was, and what he came to do, Jesus could subject himself to people. He came not to be ministered to, but to minister, and to give his life as a ransom for many (Mark 10:45). Called as children of the light, Christians are free. Their freedom, however, binds them to their calling. They are free in bondage to God. They know what it means to fear God in his presence. They are free to love their fellow Christians. The dark blindness of sinful selfishness is gone; they are free to love. They are also free to honour unbelievers as God's creatures, and to respect the role of authority given to each one.

This whole section is in direct antithesis to the spirit of the world, where every individual and group demands its 'rights' and understands liberty as freedom from responsibility. The apostle describes what is, for our time, a strange liberty. Yet, as Roberto Mangabeira Unger has pointed

out, the liberal ideal of liberty is bankrupt.¹ The liberal ideal would free every individual to do what he or she wants. If there must be curbs to this freedom, they must be neutral and impersonal. But the liberal can find no ground for this neutrality in liberal assumptions. The letter of the law cannot provide neutrality, for, on liberal assumptions, the language of law is arbitrary, carrying such meaning as we choose to assign to it. Similarly, if law is viewed as social policy, neutrality is impossible. As Alexander Solzhenitsyn reminded us, the Soviet Criminal Code of 1926 made any action directed towards the weakening of state power counter-revolutionary. Only what advanced the Soviet state was legal. If there is no standard for values outside of society, there can be no true liberty in social policy.

Peter proclaims liberty in Christ. Because our liberty is under God there is an objective standard of value. But our liberty is not under an abstract deity; it is under the true and living God. It could be no liberty at all if Christ had not died to set us free and to proclaim liberty in the jubilee time of God's favour (Luke 4:18–21).

Our freedom is necessarily in servitude to God. Paul delighted to call himself the slave of Jesus Christ.² But we also are called to serve our fellow Christians and to render proper service to the people of the world. In this section Peter describes our freedom in service: to God, to the church and to the world.³

a. Free in bondage to God: 'Fear God!'

The freedom of God's servants in this world is the freedom of *foreigners and exiles*. Those who belong to God as his people can have no abiding city here. Like Abraham, they are strangers and pilgrims, even while they live in the world which they will inherit at last (see Gen. 23:4). Peter asks his *dear friends* to *abstain from sinful desires*, as *foreigners* in a sinful world. The verb *to abstain* fits the calling of foreigners. It means literally 'to distance' themselves from fleshly lusts. Temporary residents in a foreign land are not likely to adopt the customs of the land through which they are travelling. Their standards of values, their lifestyles, are different.⁴

¹ Roberto Mangabeira Unger, *Knowledge and Politics* (Macmillan, second edition 1984).

² Rom. 1:1; Gal. 1:10; Phil. 1:1; Titus 1:1.

³ Peter uses the term *slaves* only of our service to God. Paul, too, makes it clear that Christians are not the slaves of people, even when they serve them (1 Cor. 7:21–23).

⁴ Spicq, *Epîtres*, p. 97.

Peter wants Christian pilgrims to remember their heavenly citizenship. Calling his hearers *exiles* or 'pilgrims', Peter returns to a description he used at the beginning of his letter (1:1). He has now shown why they must regard themselves as pilgrims: they are the people of God, a holy nation, and they dare not conform to the wicked conduct of their neighbours. Instead, they must bear witness by their *deeds* to the kingdom of light.

Peter calls the pilgrims *dear friends* to express his affection for them. It expresses as well their belonging to God. They are *dear* or (better) 'beloved' (*agapētoi*) not only to Peter, but to the Lord, as his own possession. Their alienation from the world is just because they are dear to God.⁵ Jesus himself is the Beloved of the Father.⁶ (The biblical use of the term goes back to the description of Isaac as the beloved son of Abraham – Gen. 22:2, LXX.) Peter's *dear friends* are God's beloved children, adopted in his Son.⁷

Because they are God's children and pilgrims in this world, Christians are also warriors, repulsing the attacks of fleshly lusts that war against the soul. Peter clearly states the opposition between the *desires* of the 'flesh' (literally) and the welfare of the *soul*. This does not mean that our souls are innately good and our bodies innately evil. When Peter lists the 'evil human desires' in the Gentile world, he includes the non-fleshly sin of 'detestable idolatry'.⁸ Yet, in our fallen world – Rome in Peter's day, New York or London in ours – the corruption of bodily desires for food, drink and sex sweeps over us like a flooding sewer. The apostle calls on Christians to be 'out of it' – out of the compulsive urgings of hammering sexual music, the seductions of pandering commercials, the sadism of pornographic films and paperbacks. In fleshly temptation the devil promises life, but his assault is against life; he would devour our very souls (5:8). John Stott well points out that the apostolic counter to lasciviousness is thankfulness for sex in loving marriage.⁹ God is the creator of our bodies; sex is his gift, not Satan's invention.

Christians have been liberated from sin's bondage, not only to praise God, but to live as his witnesses in the world. Here is an apparent paradox. Christians are not to be of the world, but they are to be in the world. Peter

warns against the desires of the flesh, but instructs us how to live 'the rest of your time in the flesh' (4:2, ASV). In a long section in the middle of his letter, Peter presents the kind of ethical instruction that was common in the early church. We find similar lists of duties within domestic relationships in Paul's letters.¹⁰ But Peter presents these duties in the framework of his special concern. He urges Christians to be the servants of God in the world, and therefore to submit themselves willingly, and even to suffer, so that God might receive the glory.

Peter's instructions tell us how to relate to the world while we are pilgrims in it. On the one hand, we do all before God and for God. (Notice how many times through the rest of this chapter Peter refers to God or Christ.) On the other hand, Christians also live before the world. Some of the duties in the Christian 'household code' were also advocated by Greek or Roman moralists.¹¹ This is not unintentional on the part of the apostles. To some extent the Gentiles do recognize right and wrong in human relationships (performance being quite another matter!). Surely to that extent Christians must commend themselves to their neighbours and win their grudging respect. When Peter tells his hearers to live *good lives*, he uses a word that can also mean 'beautiful' or 'attractive'. The high holiness of fellowship with God must also produce observable conduct, admirable in its consistency and integrity. This theme of luminous goodness runs like a thread through all of Peter's exhortations.¹² It reflects the word of Jesus, 'Let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven' (Matt. 5:16).

But, given the bias of unbelievers against God, even the good that Christians do will be ill spoken of. That certainly happened. The Roman historian Tacitus remarks that Christians were 'loathed because of their abominations'. Another author, Suetonius, approved of Nero's persecution of Christians, 'a class of people animated by a novel and mischievous superstition'.¹³

Peter knows that the opposition of the Gentile world will not be limited to gossip, calumnies and fantastic lies. Christians will be accused in the courts; false charges will lead to imprisonment and death. Peter had

⁵ John 17:16; 1 John 2:15–16.

⁶ Mark 1:11; 9:7; 2 Pet. 1:17; see Eph. 1:6; Gen. 22:2, LXX.

⁷ Rom. 1:7; Eph. 5:1.

⁸ 1 Pet. 4:2–3. See Paul's list of the deeds of the flesh, Gal. 5:19–21.

⁹ Stott, *The Message of Ephesians* (IVP, 2020), pp. 146–147.

¹⁰ Col. 3:18–4:1; Eph. 5:21–6:9; 1 Tim. 2:8–15; 5:1–2; 6:1–2; Titus 2:1–10; 3:1. On the Ephesians passage, see Stott, *op. cit.*, pp. 165ff. On the background of the code of household ethics, see Balch.

¹¹ See Balch; Spicq, *Épîtres*, pp. 95f.; Goppelt, pp. 163–179; Stott, *op. cit.*, p. 186.

¹² 1 Pet. 1:14–15, 22; 2:9–12, 15–16, 20; 3:1, 10–17; 4:4–5, 17; 5:5–6.

¹³ Kelly, p. 105.

escaped the sword of Herod, but he would not escape the perverse hatred of Nero.

Yet in spite of pagan injustice, the impact of the Christian witness will not be lost, in Peter's day or ours. The surrounding world will see the *good deeds* of the Christian community (12). They cannot avoid it. For some, unbelief will turn to belief as they behold the obedience of the people of God. Unbelieving husbands will see, and be touched by, the godliness of their wives (3:1–2). On the day of God's 'visitation' (RSV, ASV), even those who misrepresented and hated the good works of Christians will *glorify God* for them. }

The term 'visitation' in the Old Testament most often refers to God's coming in judgment.¹⁴ It is also used, however, of God's coming in mercy. Zacharias praises God for 'visiting' and redeeming his people in the birth of his son John. John is the forerunner of the Messiah, in whom 'the dayspring from on high hath visited us' (Luke 1:78, AV). If the *day he visits us* here bears a positive sense, it would mean the conviction and conversion of those who have seen Christian behaviour. However, in view of the emphasis that Peter puts on the coming of judgment in the day of the Lord, it seems more likely that Peter is describing the day when every tongue shall confess that Jesus Christ is Lord (Phil. 2:11). God's searching judgment will then compel the acknowledgment, to his glory, of the faithful living of his true servants.¹⁵

b. Free in submission to others

Peter draws a radical and difficult conclusion. Christians who would *live as God's slaves* in this world (16) must be willing to be in submission to others. There is, of course, a vast difference between our submission to God and our submission to other people. He tells us to fear God; he does not tell us to fear people. Peter does not call us to become their slaves. Even when he addresses those who are slaves, he uses another word which could be translated 'household servants' (18). Peter does not argue that we should be lowly before others because we are lowly before God. He does the opposite; he stresses the privileged position to which God has exalted us. We have been brought near to God as priests, saints, sons and

¹⁴ Jeremiah uses the term most frequently (see ASV 8:12; 10:15; 11:23; etc.). God is said to 'visit iniquity' to judgment (ASV Exod. 20:5; 34:7; Lev. 18:25). God's 'visit' may also bring blessing (ASV Gen. 21:1; 50:24).

¹⁵ So Bénétreau, pp. 147f., as against Stibbs, Selwyn and Goppelt – who mistakenly says, 'A forced praise would be absurd' (p. 162).

daughters. Because we are God's own possession, beloved of the Lord, we need not cherish our own dignity. Indeed, we may not. For the Lord's sake, for our fellow Christians' sake, for the world's sake, we must be ready to subordinate ourselves to others.

We submit ourselves for the world's sake so that our good deeds may be a witness to them or a testimony against them. We submit ourselves for our fellow Christians' sake out of sacrificial love for them. We submit ourselves for God's sake because we honour his image in our fellow creatures, and because we respect his ordering of our lives, but especially because we gratefully seek to take up our cross and follow Jesus Christ. In the code of duties that follows, Peter describes Christian living in terms of submission: submission to one another as Christians, and especially to unbelievers.

2. The new lifestyle's practice: submission in role relationships (2:13–15, 18–20)

a. Submission as citizens of worldly kingdoms (2:13–15)

Peter provides almost a title for what follows: *Submit yourselves*. In this whole section the general principle of submission is developed according to the roles that we fill: citizens are to submit themselves to their *governors* (14) and servants to their masters (18); wives to their husbands (3:1) and, in a yet deeper sense, husbands to their wives (3:7); and Christians to one another (3:8).

It is this link with what follows that helps us to understand what might seem to be a strange expression: literally 'Be subject to every human creature' (13). Many interpreters give another meaning to the word for 'creature'. They take it to mean 'order' or 'institution' (see NRSV). It is hard to find a clear example of this meaning outside the Bible, and it never means this in biblical usage.¹⁶ Peter is not talking about submission to institutions, but submission to people; to people, however, who have been given roles to fill in God's appointment. Our submission is to creatures of God made in his image. We are to 'show proper respect to everyone' (17), recognizing them as God's creatures to whom honour and respect are due. C. S. Lewis has said that if we could see a lowly Christian as he or she will

¹⁶ See W. Foerster, *TDNT III*, pp. 103f.; Kelly, pp. 108f.; Spicq, *Épîtres*, pp. 101f.; Goppelt, p. 182; Bénétreau, pp. 149f.