

“Living Among Unbelieving Neighbors”

1 Peter 2:11-12

The city of Middelburg, located in the southwestern part of Netherlands, dates back to the late eighth century. And to this day, it remains a quiet little town of less than 50,000 people. Yet two inventions within only a few years of each other came from this small town’s cobblestone streets and went on to change the world. One invention allowed human beings to gaze far away across vast distances. The other invention allowed people to peer deeply into that which most closely surrounds us. And to what inventions am I referring? The telescope and the microscope.

Most historians agree that the first discovery was made in the shop of an obscure Dutch craftsmen by the name of Hans Lippershey in Middleburg about 1600. In the hands of Galileo, and turned toward the heavens above, our view of the world as well as our place in the cosmos was forever changed.

Meanwhile, another spectacle-maker from Middelburg by the name of Zacharias Jansen, stumbled upon the second discovery. It was a device that opened up another world to the human eye—the microscope. As Galileo seized the invention of the telescope to chart the galaxies, Antoni van Leeuwenhoek took advantage of the development of the microscope to explore the equally vast world of the minuscule. With it, he became the first microbiologist.

And so from one small town came two inventions that offered radically different views, yet both supplied much needed perspective on the complexity and immensity of our universe. One allowed for a closer look at the world above us, while the other allowed for a closer look at the world among us.

How many of you realize that in order to successfully navigate the waters of today's cultural climate, we need both perspectives? We need a closer and more in-depth understanding of heaven, and we need a closer and more informed perspective of the world we live in. God's Word is the lens through which we view both this life and the next.

It is such perspective that the book of 1 Peter gives us. In chapter one, Peter has largely dealt with the importance of our hope when facing the hurts of life. Within the second chapter, he points out how our hope in Christ determines the way we live and operate in the midst of a corrupt culture, even in the heart of a society that is anti-Christian to the core.

He will answer questions such as:

- What role should Christians play in secular culture?
- How do we respond to increasing marginalization?

Peter says that you and I are to live for Christ in the midst of a corrupt culture. We are not to retreat into our caves and crevices. Rather, we are to have a gospel perspective on life and courageously proclaim the excellencies of Him who called us out of darkness into His marvelous light.

Peter reminds us that we as believers have a mission to accomplish in the world, and therefore we can't afford to lock ourselves outside the world. The Christian's solution to the problem of holy living in an unholy world is not isolation from the outside—it's insulation on the inside.

Isolation is withdrawal from the outside world, insulation is protection on the inside that holds up under adversity. The insulation we need is provided through Christ. Peter says that it involves knowing who we are. Who are we?

- Living stones being built up into a spiritual house
- Royal priests serving in God's temple
- Chosen people for God's own possession

In verse 9, Peter has emphasized that we are given great purpose in Jesus Christ:

"...that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light."

We've been saved so that the praises of Jesus Christ will ever be on our lips. But more than that, Peter goes on to show how those praises are to be reflected through our very lives.

From 2:11 through 3:10, Peter gives his most practical instructions. He will address issues such as how we relate to others through human institutions like the government, marriage, and the family unit itself. I can't think of anything more important for Christians in our culture today than to seek to answer, "How now shall we live?"

Peter is going to show us that our freedom in Christ leads to a life of submission. Just because I have been saved and forgiven of my sin doesn't mean that I am free to do as I please. Rather, our freedom is a submissive and willing servant freedom under the Lordship of Christ.

2:16—“Live as people who are free, not using your freedom as a cover-up for evil, but living as servants of God.”

Edmond Clowney—*“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.”*

Peter wants his readers to understand that their freedom binds them to their calling. They are called to be different. As citizens of God’s kingdom, they are to live lives that are in keeping with who they are in Christ.

In verses 11-12, he begins this next section by saying that how we live as Christians among our unbelieving neighbors is extremely important. Within these verses, Peter shows us how the followers of Jesus are to live and work and go to school among those who do not always share our faith or embrace our values. What are we to do? I’m going to show you. To start with, Peter says that we are to:

1. Stand FIRM against sinful desires (2:11)

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

Before he begins explaining how believers should live on the outside before those who are watching our lives, Peter calls us to spiritual diligence on the inside. Our internal thought life is where the spiritual battle is waged. What we think and believe internally will impact how we behave externally before others.

Legalism deals only with externals. It concerns itself with appearances more so than attitudes. The gospel, however, deals with internals. It gets to the heart of the issue, which is always my heart. And so first things first!

Peter’s affirmation

“Beloved, I urge you as sojourners and exiles...”

By referring to his readers as those who are 'beloved,' he is once more reminding them of their privileged status as those who have been brought into the family of faith. They are God's 'beloved' children. God had placed His special affection on them, not because of anything special about them, but because of His own grace and mercy.

Again, keep in mind what Peter has just said in verse 10:

"Once you were not a people, but now you are God's people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy."

As God's spiritual house, holy priesthood, and chosen possession, we are those who have been set apart for a purpose. We are citizens of God's kingdom, even though we are presently living far from home.

This makes us 'sojourners' and 'exiles' in the world. We saw this same emphasis in chapter 1 as Peter begins the letter by addressing his readers as 'elect exiles' who were scattered throughout their world. The idea is that believers are resident aliens. We are in the world, but we are not of the world. We don't quite belong, nor fit in. Our citizenship is in heaven. Therefore, we are to think and live like it.

Peter's appeal

"...to abstain from the passions of the flesh..."

On the basis of who we are in Christ, Peter 'urges' us to abstain from the passions of the flesh. The word he uses is 'parakaleo' which means to call to one's side. It is the same word used throughout the New Testament to describe the ministry of the Holy Spirit in our lives. Peter is saying, "I am coming along side of you to urge you as God's beloved children to abstain from fleshly lusts."

As those who have been born again, we are no longer to live for unbridled lust. Peter says that the real battle is not with the people around us, but with the passions within us. This often goes against our normal assumptions. We often assume that the nature of spiritual conflict begins on the outside with those who don't believe like us, think like us, or act like us. Let me tell you a little secret—lost people act like lost people. Their eyes are blinded to spiritual truth. They are in darkness, living only for their fleshly appetites because they have not yet come to know Christ.

But for those who know God, things are different. Rather than indulge in, we abstain from passions of the flesh.

Peter's argument

"...which wage war against your soul."

We must abstain from passions of the flesh because, according to what Peter says, they 'wage war' against our soul.

"Wage War" —*the word is 'strateuomai' and means to serve in a military campaign; same word we get 'strategy'*

The point being made is that our desires are constantly bombarding the fortress of our soul, and we must be vigilant. Satan's 'strategy' involves exploiting our desires against us through temptation. (i.e. Eve, David, Jesus)

James 1:14-16—“But each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire. Then desire when it has conceived gives birth to sin, and sin when it is fully grown brings forth death. Do not be deceived, my beloved brothers.”

And so Peter’s argument is this—as the children of God, we are strangers and resident aliens in the world. As such, rather than indulging in sinful passions, we abstain from them because they wage a military campaign against us.

2. Stand STRONG through godly character (2:12a)

“Keep your conduct among the Gentiles honorable...”

Living among unbelieving neighbors demands that we stand firm against our own sinful passions. Next, it also demands that we stand strong through godly character. Peter begins by addressing our internal character, but he moves on to address our external conduct. That’s because what we believe deep down on the inside always shows up through how we live on the outside.

Within verse 12, I find at least three important principles that reinforce the notion that our behavior—how we live our life—matters to God.

#1—Diligence principle

“Keep your conduct...”

The idea is that you and I have a responsibility in this endeavor. We must be diligent when it comes to our ‘conduct.’ It is a word that refers to our total manner of life or our lifestyle. We are to be intentional when it comes to keeping our desires in check and keeping our lifestyle in step with the gospel.

#2—Devotion principle

“Keep your conduct...honorable.”

Some translations use the word ‘excellent’ or ‘good.’ Older translations say, “Having your conversation honest.” The idea is that our total manner of life is to reflect God’s grace and God’s calling our lives as believers.

Unfortunately, many Christians in the west like to think that we can compartmentalize our life. Compartmentalized Christianity says I can act a certain way in one place, but not in another. They approach the Christian life like some people use the phrase, “What happens in Vegas stays in Vegas.” Ever heard that phrase before? It is this idea that when you go to Las Vegas, you get a free pass to do crazy stuff that you would never normally do. Too many people live by the principle, “What happens at church stays at church.”

Compartmentalized Christianity restricts spiritual matters to only one area of life among many others.

The only problem with that is this—the gospel of Jesus Christ is holistic. Christ demands every area of my life be surrendered to Him in obedience. He is Lord of my:

- leisure habits
- sexual ethics
- financial decisions

#3—Dispersion principle

“Keep your conduct among the Gentiles honorable.”

Peter reminds his readers that they are to intentionally live with honorable behavior among the Gentiles, among those who do not know or worship God. Though I understand it is not a sufficient excuse, more people have rejected Christianity because of the behavior of Christians than anything else.

(illus. of autocorrect ‘horrible’ vs. ‘honorable’)

There ought to be an excellent quality that surrounds our lifestyle as Christians as we live among our unbelieving neighbors. Not an attitude of superiority, nor an ungodly attitude of judgmentalism. The way we live and the way we love is to appear radically different from anything else that the world has ever seen.

This past week, our family spent some time up in D.C. for spring break. I've been looking forward to going to the Museum of the Bible for some time. On the fifth floor, there is a collection of Bibles throughout the centuries. One such Bible was known as the Wicked Bible. It was published in 1631 by Barker and Lucas, the royal printers in London. They meant for it to be a reprint of the King James Bible, but their edition became known as the Wicked Bible because of a mistake they made. In Exodus 20:14, where the Ten Commandments are found, they left out a three letter word 'not' so that verse 14 reads, "Thou shalt commit adultery." Hence, it was called the Wicked Bible...

Rather than keeping our conduct before the Gentiles 'horrible' or by taking our cues from the Wicked Bible, Peter's exhortation is for us to keep our conduct 'honorable!'

Perhaps a good exercise for us is to take specific examples of behavior and substitute it for the word conduct:

- Keep your social media habits honorable
- Keep your language honorable
- Keep your internet use honorable
- Keep your work ethic honorable

On and on we could go.

3. Stand OUT by good deeds (2:12b)

“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.”

Living among unbelieving neighbors means that we first stand against our own sinful desires. It demands that we stand strong through godly character. And finally, it requires that we stand out by good deeds.

Peter’s readers were being persecuted by their society because of their new life in Christ. Their lifestyle was totally different, and therefore misunderstood. Yet it gave them an opportunity to display how the truth of Christ had changed them.

Jesus had a lot to say about this:

Matthew 5:13-16—“You are the salt of the earth, but if the salt has lost its taste, how shall its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything except to be thrown out and trampled under people’s feet. You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden. Not do people light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on a stand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven.”

Think about the story of the Good Samaritan. Do you want to know what makes it so compelling? The merciful actions of the Samaritan were done on behalf of a complete stranger, someone who could not return the favor. And the Samaritan bore the full weight of expense for the man’s recovery.

(Jesus is the Good Samaritan! Through His life, His death, and resurrection.)

As believers, we win the right to be heard, not through our advertising campaigns, not through our programs or cool factor, and not through great music or oratorical ability. We win the right to be heard by our unbelieving neighbors by compassionate, selfless deeds in Jesus' name. Not our words, but our actions.

Warren Wiersbe — *“In the summer of 1805, a number of Indian chiefs and warriors met in council at Buffalo Creek, New York, to hear a presentation of the Christian message by a Mr. Cram from the Boston Missionary Society. After the sermon, a response was given by Red Jacket, one of the leading chiefs. Among other things, the chief said, ‘Brother, we are told that you have been preaching to the white people in this place. These people are our neighbors. We are acquainted with them. We will wait a little while and see what effect your preaching has upon them. If we find it does them good, makes them honest and less disposed to cheat Indians, we will then consider again what you have said.’”*

And what is the ultimate purpose? Not our own self-glory, but the glory of God. All the praise, glory, and honor belongs to Jesus Christ!

Conclusion:

- Determine by God's grace to live a clean life
- Display the gospel through both word and deed
- Don't forget that your life is under the microscope

Has your life been changed by the power of the gospel of Jesus Christ? If it has, then it won't be hard to tell. Your life will reflect different priorities. You will be distinguished by the love of God. The fruit of the Spirit will be on display in your life for the world to see. And it will give unbelieving neighbors a powerful glimpse of the gospel.