

A PEOPLE IN THE WORLD

1 Peter 2:11-12

November 16, 2008 – Grace Covenant Baptist Church

This morning we begin to look at the second major section of Peter's epistle which begins in v. 11 with the word, "**Beloved.**" Having examined the Christian's identity and their relationship to God and one another (1:3-2:10), Peter now turns his attention to how the Christian is to relate to the world. In the first section, Peter provided the framework by addressing theological terms that particularly relate to the gospel that included a general call to lives of holiness. In this section he gives more specific instructions for holiness in real life situations. In other words, this section provided Peter's Christian ethic for the Christian to live in the world but not of the world. As Peter has already suggested, the believer and the body of Christ is set apart from the world as the people of God. However, the arena that God has placed the believer in is His world

These were important words from Peter to these believers who were scattered throughout the world. They were part of the early church, a people with a new identity in the same fallen world from which they had been delivered. The persecution they received from those who did not see things the way they did, who not only did not view the world through the lens of the gospel but were openly hostile to the gospel and those who believed it, was intense. And they had every reason to believe that the persecution would only grow in its intensity. It would have been easy for these believers, who knew the evil influences of their culture, to simply go into hiding, to withdraw from it all and live their lives in seclusion, truly separating themselves from the world. After all, was that not their calling, a calling that Peter had stressed in the opening of the letter? However, here Peter reminds them that while they were set apart, they were to be in the world but not of it.

How were they to accomplish this? It is in answer to this that Peter gives these words of exhortation. We see the urgency in Peter's writing, "**Beloved, I urge you.**" He begs them as a loving brother to live lives that were above reproach in the midst of worldliness, hostility and wickedness. In the two verses we have before us, Peter sets the scene in the form of a battle, reminding these Christians and all Christians that *in their days on this earth, before they received that blessed inheritance that was already theirs in Christ, they would be involved in warfare*, the ultimate of world wars. This was a spiritual battle, a battle for the gospel both from within and from without.

Peter describes this battle in two ways: 1) The Battle for the Soul, and 2) The Battle for the Gospel.

I. The Battle for the Soul (2:11)

This battle that was set before them as a result of their profession of faith in Christ was a battle that began in their own backyard, with the enemy within. It is only as they gained victories against this enemy that the battle with the enemy without could be accomplished. With this in mind, Peter uses these verses as a transition from the first section to the second section of the letter. Verse 11 serves as a summary of the introduction as seen in the words, "**aliens and strangers.**" He reminds them of their status on this earth as he did in the opening of the letter. They were "**aliens,**" non-residents with limited rights living in a place that was not their home. As "**aliens**" they could not make demands upon the rulers of the place where they lived. "**Aliens**" live in a foreign country but keep their own citizenship. As "**strangers,**" they live in a

world that is foreign to them and only temporary. They know that their citizenship is in heaven (Phil. 3:20).

Peter's reminder here is of utmost importance. It signifies the truth that the believer is just passing through, yes, but it also signifies that they are here, remaining according to God's purposes in this world. Peter's words reflect Christ's prayer in John 17. In John 17:11, Jesus prayed to the Father, "I am no longer in the world; and *yet* they themselves are in the world." Then in John 17:14-18,

¹⁴ "I have given them Your word; and the world has hated them, because they are not of the world, even as I am not of the world. ¹⁵ I do not ask You to take them out of the world, but to keep them from the evil *one*. ¹⁶ They are not of the world, even as I am not of the world. ¹⁷ Sanctify them in the truth; Your word is truth. ¹⁸ As You sent Me into the world, I also have sent them into the world."

So the stage is set. The believer is to be in the world, sent by Christ as His ambassadors, but not of the world. Christians will remain as "**aliens and strangers**" on this earth as long as Christ leaves them here. As they realize their true citizenship, as born from above, they are to live their lives according to the rules of their country, a different and far better country. They are not to withdraw from this world nor are they to immerse themselves in the culture to show they belong by accommodating to its values. As John Stott put it, the believer lives "between two worlds." So what is Peter's strategy for living the Christian life on this earth?

It begins by fighting the battle for our soul, by fleeing and turning daily from sin. Peter says, "**Abstain from fleshly lusts which wage war against the soul.**" Peter does not suggest separation from the world, but to stay and fight. And this fight begins for the believer by looking after their own souls, where a war between flesh and spirit rages. In 1:14, Peter had already mentioned these "**fleshly lusts**" that used to control a person before they were born again and enlightened by the Holy Spirit, "As obedient children, do not be conformed to the former lusts *which were yours* in your ignorance." Peter uses the word "**fleshly**" in the same sense as Paul used it in Romans 6-8 and Galatians 5. It is not a reference to our skin, which God in His magnificent wisdom provided for our bodies to keep everything in place and to make us more aesthetically appealing. The "flesh" refers to our sinful appetites, desires and passions that remain as a part of our sin nature. These "**fleshly lusts**" are not destroyed when one is saved by Christ. They remain, looking for any opportunity to rear their ugliness in our lives. Where they used to govern before one comes to Christ, they now wage war within us in order to overthrow the lordship of Christ and draw us back into our former behavior or to the behavior that saturates culture.¹ It is from these sinful passions that Peter says the believer is to "**abstain,**" literally, "continue to hold yourself back from." The battle does not end at salvation. In many ways it intensifies.

Paul understood this well. In Romans 6:10-14 he describes the life in Christ and the subsequent freedom from the bondage of sin:

Romans 6:10-14 – ¹⁰ For the death that He died, He died to sin once for all; but the life that He lives, He lives to God. ¹¹ Even so consider yourselves to be dead to sin, but alive to God in Christ Jesus. ¹² Therefore do not let sin reign in your mortal body so that you obey its lusts, ¹³ and do not go on presenting the members of your body to sin *as* instruments of unrighteousness; but present yourselves to God as those alive from the

¹ Angus MacLeay, *Teaching 1 Peter*, 109.

dead, and your members *as* instruments of righteousness to God. ¹⁴ For sin shall not be master over you, for you are not under law but under grace.

These are glorious words indeed! However, lest the believer become too cozy, Paul describes the consequent war that rages in Romans 7:18-24:

Romans 7:18-24 – ¹⁸ For I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh; for the willing is present in me, but the doing of the good *is* not. ¹⁹ For the good that I want, I do not do, but I practice the very evil that I do not want. ²⁰ But if I am doing the very thing I do not want, I am no longer the one doing it, but sin which dwells in me. ²¹ I find then the principle that evil is present in me, the one who wants to do good. ²² For I joyfully concur with the law of God in the inner man, ²³ but I see a different law in the members of my body, waging war against the law of my mind and making me a prisoner of the law of sin which is in my members. ²⁴ Wretched man that I am! Who will set me free from the body of this death?

Paul further described this battle in Galatians 5:16-17:

Galatians 5:16-17 – ¹⁶ But I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not carry out the desire of the flesh. ¹⁷ For the flesh sets its desire against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh; for these are in opposition to one another, so that you may not do the things that you please.

Paul's conclusion in the matter in Romans 8:12-14 corresponds to Peter's admonition to **“abstain from fleshly lusts which wage war against the soul.”**

Romans 8:12-14 – ¹² So then, brethren, we are under obligation, not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh— ¹³ for if you are living according to the flesh, you must die; but if by the Spirit you are putting to death the deeds of the body, you will live. ¹⁴ For all who are being led by the Spirit of God, these are sons of God.

That is what it means to fight, to **“abstain.”** It is a constant and mindful “putting to death” the passions and desires of our sin nature that is against the Spirit, seeking to usurp Christ's place on the throne of your heart. Peter certainly understood the battle for the soul though he learned it from difficult experience. Jesus asked Peter a very important question pertaining to the soul in Matthew 16:25-26, ²⁵ “For whoever wishes to save his life will lose it; but whoever loses his life for My sake will find it. ²⁶ For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world and forfeits his soul? Or what will a man give in exchange for his soul?”

Derek Thomas's commentary here is quite relevant today.

Do you see how up-to-date Peter's epistle is? To those of us who live our lives in a routine of gaining things for this world, in spending all of our energies in the attainment of the things of this world, Peter says, “Now if you live your lives with the perspective that ‘this world is not my home I'm just a-passing through’ there will be a consequence.” And that consequence will be: you will be much more concerned about your soul than you will be concerned about the things of this world. It is the soul, Peter says, that is the most important thing. If the soul is lost, the whole person is lost.

Now the world will not set an agenda for you to keep your souls... The world will set an agenda for all kinds of things. It will tell you how to fight AIDS; it will tell you how to fight cockroaches; it will tell you how to fight cholesterol; it will tell you how to fight

mosquitoes; it will tell you how to fight all kinds of things, but it won't tell you how to wage war in order to save your soul.²

Paul said, "If by the Spirit you are putting to death the deeds of the body, you will live" (Rom. 8:13). Peter said, "**Abstain from fleshly lusts which wage war against the soul.**" Jesus said, "Deny yourself, take up your cross, and follow Me" (Mk. 8:34). How are you doing in the battle for your soul? The Puritan John Owen, who wrote perhaps some of the most theological thought-provoking treatises on sin and temptation ever written, words that are difficult to comprehend because of the wordiness of a Puritan, wrote rather simply, "Be killing sin or it will be killing you."³ May we heed Owen's warning and Peter's exhortation to "**abstain from fleshly lusts?**" We have an enemy within. There is a battle for your soul.

II. The Battle for the Gospel (2:12)

Having recognized this foundational battle that is won by fleeing from the deeds of the flesh, Peter gives the second part of his strategy for living in the world but not of the world. While there is a battle for the soul within, there is also a battle for the gospel without. Peter transitions to the believer's relation to the world with the words, "**Keep your behavior excellent among the Gentiles.**" Peter's designation of "**Gentiles**" is rather interesting in that he is writing to a group of predominately Gentile Christians. I agree with Wayne Grudem, who points out that "Peter calls unbelievers *Gentiles*... because he once again assumes that Christians (both literal Jews and literal Gentiles within the body of Christ) are 'true Israel'. Therefore all who are not Christians (both literal Jews and literal Gentiles) are truly 'Gentiles.'"⁴

So Peter reminds us that the battle we fight within is a battle that is fought in real time in this world, amongst those who, just like our sin nature, are spiritually opposed to us. The world and its system actually feeds the flesh and fuels our passions. So again, we might expect Peter to tell his readers to withdraw from the world to protect themselves from these evil onslaughts. However, he tells them to remain and adopt good conduct amongst the Gentiles. Maintaining good behavior would be difficult in the midst of the slanders from those who had nothing short of full-blown hatred for Christians. "**The thing in which they slander you as evildoers**" was a reflection of this hatred. There was no such thing as a "fairness doctrine" in the world which these Christians lived. Stories were often exaggerated or taken out of context against the believer. Putting a spin on things would be a classic understatement. The unbeliever acted out of ignorance towards anything and everything the Christian faith stood for. These 1st century believers were accused of cannibalism (because of the Lord's Supper terminology); incest (because they loved each other); atheism (because their God was invisible); treason (because they would not serve in the army or pledge allegiance to Caesar); and immorality (possibly the holy kiss).⁵ Do you see how those who do not know Christ, who represent the world in which we live, so twist and distort the truth? This is what the Christian in the 1st century and Christianity ever since have to endure, these slanders of ignorance from the unbeliever. And yet Peter exhorted them, and us, to maintain good behavior in the midst of evil.

This good behavior, which flowed from their seeking to be holy, both individually and corporately, would lead to "**good deeds,**" again, works *in the world* that God had placed them.

² Derek Thomas, http://www.fpcjackson.org/resources/sermons/Derek%27s_SERMONS/1%20Peter/02bpeter.htm, accessed 11/14/2008.

³ John Owen, *The Works of John Owen*, 6:9

⁴ Wayne Grudem, *TNTC: 1 Peter*, 116.

⁵ Bob Utley, *1 Peter*, 234.

It is easy for us to maintain good behavior and good works when we gather together as the body of saints. But what about the other six days of the week when we are in the midst of this perversity and slander? Peter says the believer is to remain being good and doing good in the world. And for what purpose? To be living examples of the gospel which the world would observe. Simon Kistemaker comments:

God calls us to be his people in the society in which we live. He wants us to be living testimonies of his love and mercy toward sinners because through our lives he calls others to himself. Our conduct and confession, then, ought never to be stumbling blocks for our unbelieving neighbors.⁶

Of course, Kistemaker is not suggesting that one comes to know Christ apart from the proclamation of the gospel. He would agree with Paul that “faith comes from hearing, and hearing by the word of Christ” (Rom. 10:17). But what he rightly suggests is that the unbeliever should not be able to look at the life of a professing Christian who is not living up to the mandate of being good and doing good as an excuse not to listen to the gospel or consider Christ.

Peter seems to suggest this very thing by the phrase “**in the day of visitation.**” This could refer, and often does, to the day of judgment at the Lord’s return, that great day when “every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father” (Phil. 3:11). If that be the case, then what Peter says is that the good deeds of the believer in this world will be finally vindicated by these unbelievers who would hold them up as being good examples. However, this interpretation depicts an unwilling means of glorifying God. Another interpretation of this “**day of visitation**” is that it refers to the time when the gospel is proclaimed and the Spirit of God works in the life of the unbeliever. Tom Schreiner, whose view I hold, put it this way, “Peter exhorted the believers to live noble lives because in doing so, unbelievers will see their good works. Because they observe such works, some believers will repent and believe and therefore give glory to God on the last day.”⁷ This is the same idea that Peter sets forth in 3:1-2, ¹“In the same way, you wives, be submissive to your own husbands so that even if any *of them* are disobedient to the word, they may be won without a word by the behavior of their wives, ² as they observe your chaste and respectful behavior.” What Peter suggests in these passages is that he is confident that in the midst of the ungodliness of the age some unbelievers would be saved as they noticed the godliness in their lives.

Hence my conclusion that Peter here sets forth a battle for the gospel. Where in v. 11 it is *our* soul that is at stake, in v. 12 it is the souls *of others*. It echoes Peter’s thought in 1 Peter 2:9, “that you may proclaim the excellencies of Him who has called you out of darkness into His marvelous light.” We do this by being good and doing good wherever God has placed us on this earth. Christians live in glass houses—and unbelievers are watching our every move. God has left His people here, as “**aliens and strangers,**” to reflect His glory in a perverse world so that He might be glorified.

So what Peter suggests, before getting into the nitty-gritty of other earthly relationships, is that the believer is to live with this purpose: in everything I do I will do it in order to bring glory to God. No matter where I am or the circumstances that I find myself, I am concerned not about me, but His glory. What is the glory of God? When we speak of bringing glory to God, we are not saying that by glorifying Him we somehow add to His glory. God is glory! It is inherent to who He is. But in glorifying Him we are agreeing that He is glorious and He alone is worthy to receive glory. This glory has a particular meaning in the Scriptures. It means something that is

⁶ Simon J. Kistemaker, *NTC: 1 Peter*, 96.

⁷ Thomas R. Schreiner, *NAC: 1,2 Peter, Jude*, 124.

heavy; it means something that is weighty. Unfortunately, our culture does not seem to have any sense of this weightiness. In his commentary on our present culture *God in the Wasteland*, David Wells makes the following observation:

It is one of the defining marks of our time that God is now weightless. I do not mean by this that he is ethereal but rather that he has become unimportant. He rests upon the world so inconsequentially as not to be noticeable. He has lost his saliency for human life. Those who assure the pollsters of their belief in God's existence may nonetheless consider him less interesting than television, his commands less authoritative than their appetites for affluence and influence, his judgments no more awe-inspiring than the evening news, and his truth less compelling than the advertiser's sweet fog of flattery and lies. That is weightlessness. It is a condition we have assigned him after having nudged him out to the periphery of our secularized life. His truth is no longer welcome in our public discourse. The engine of modernity rumbles on, and he is but a speck in its path.⁸

Derek Thomas further comments:

In our modern society God doesn't have to go on a diet because you can barely see Him. He is so insignificant in the modern society in which we live that you can barely see Him. He's inconsequential to our modern society and Peter is saying as Christians that we are to have the exact opposite perspective. We are to be concerned about bringing the weightiness and the significance of God into every circumstance that we find ourselves in: that's the way to live your lives.⁹

If you profess to know Christ this morning, does the glory of God so consume you that you seek to live for Him regardless of your circumstances? Are you triumphing over the flesh and doing good at all times? Have you grasped the truth that God has ordained both the end and the means of salvation and that He uses us, fragile as we are, as a means to bring the lost to Him? That, my friends, is a glorious God!

Conclusion

- 1. Many do not recognize the battle of the flesh until after the fact.**
- 2. It is as important for the world to know what we are against as what we are for.**

⁸ David Wells, *God in the Wasteland*, 88; quoted by John Piper, http://www.desiringgod.org/ResourceLibrary/Sermons/ByScripture/4/874_The_War_Against_the_Soul_and_the_Glory_of_God, accessed 11/14/2008.

⁹ Thomas, http://www.fpcjackson.org/resources/sermons/Derek%27s_SERMONS/1%20Peter/02bpeter.htm