

I missed being with you all the last two weeks! I had the chance last Sunday to preach at a church in Florida while my family was on vacation. I asked my kids on our way home, “What was your favorite part of our entire trip?” We went to the pool, the beach, and parks; we saw wild alligators—we had so many fun experiences. But they each said their favorite part of the trip was going to church down there. It wasn’t a fancy church. There were literally 100 people meeting in a motor-coach retirement community center. There was no fancy children’s ministry; they were the only kids in the church. They didn’t sing any songs the kids knew, only four hymns that older saints love! Nothing about it said, “Kids are going to love it here”—but they did! No matter the place, or the building, or the average age of the worshippers, there is something special about the church, and I told my kids, “This sort of thing is happening all over the world. People you’ve never met before, people who don’t look like you, many of whom don’t speak the same language as you, gather as the people of God, to worship him and love one another. What my kids experienced wasn’t nostalgia or novelty—it was the beauty of the church being the church.

Peter tells us why that beauty exists. In our passage today, he teaches us what it means to be the church—we’ll learn about our identity, our mission, and the unique assignments we’ve been given.

Dear friends, I urge you, as foreigners and exiles, to abstain from sinful desires, which wage war against your soul. Live such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us. Submit yourselves for the Lord’s sake to every human authority: whether to the emperor, as the supreme authority, or to governors, who are sent by him to punish those who do wrong and to commend those who do right. For it is God’s will that by doing good you should silence the ignorant talk of foolish people. Live as free people, but do not use your freedom as a cover-up for evil; live as God’s slaves. Show proper respect to everyone, love the family of believers, fear God, honor the emperor. (1 Peter 2:11-17)

This is such a powerful and practical passage, with incredible relevance for our lives today. It teaches us about our identity, our mission, and our assignments. The first two are broader in scope, the final one is detailed and very specific.

Our Identity

Peter makes two very clear and direct assertions about our identity. In 2:11 he says we are “foreigners and exiles,” and in 2:16 he says we are “God’s slaves.” These two statements about our identity in this world inform and shape the way we respond to the cultural events of our day. Because of my work as a pastor, I’ve had the chance to visit several countries to learn about the mission work that is taking place, and try my best to encourage, support,

and resource our missionaries. When I am in a foreign country, a country that is not my home, I am always very interested in what's taking place that is shaping life in that area, such as the local economy and politics. I was in a country last year where they had a presidential election while I was there. I paid attention; I followed along. But I didn't get overly engaged, or overly emotionally committed, because it was not my home. I was just a visiting foreigner. Peter says that's how we live our entire lives here because this world is not our home. Paul says in Philippians 3:20, "Our citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await a Savior from there—the Lord Jesus Christ." No matter what country you were born in, no matter what country may be on the front of your passport, if you are a follower of Jesus, your citizenship is in heaven. That is your true identity.

Living as exiles doesn't mean we don't care about the affairs of the world and simply check out. Rather, the opposite is true. Jeremiah 29:5-7 speaks to God's people who were exiles in a foreign land.

Build houses and settle down; plant gardens and eat what they produce. Marry and have sons and daughters; find wives for your sons and give your daughters in marriage, so that they too may have sons and daughters. Increase in number there; do not decrease. Also, seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have carried you into exile. Pray to the Lord for it, because if it prospers, you too will prosper.

Care about the country where you live. Care about the culture. Raise your family. Build a career. Seek peace and prosperity. But remember that it's not home! We don't put our hope in a political leader, an economic leader, or a military leader to make things right; we put our hope in Jesus Christ!

Peter not only tells us we are foreigners and exiles, but he also tells us we are God's slaves. Anyone who is a slave is not focused on doing what they personally prefer, but on doing what their master has directed them to do. A slave is also not too focused on or emotionally invested in other people's affairs. They aren't focused on the neighbor's household. They aren't focused on the business down the street. They are focused on their master—his affairs, his business, his directions. I can't tell you how helpful it is when people ask you for your hot take on some contentious matter that is in the news to simply respond, "I'm not sure; that's not really any of my business." It's not about apathy; it's about different priorities! You don't have to be a self-important political commentator. You are God's slaves, so specialize in his affairs, not the affairs of the world.

Our Mission

Peter tells us first about our identity, second about our mission.

- "Live such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us" (1 Peter 2:12).

- “For it is God’s will that by doing good you should silence the ignorant talk of foolish people” (1 Peter 2:15).
-

Notice that each of these mission statements focuses on Christians’ good lives, good deeds, and doing good. We are supposed to live such good lives that people see our good deeds and their foolish talk is silenced. Instead of bringing accusations against God, they turn to glorify God. Peter is saying that the world will be changed by the witness of Jesus’ followers. He wrote that 2,000 years ago, and that is the very thing that has happened.

A neutral, objective study of history will show you that Christians didn’t simply preach new ideas—they reordered society. It was Christians who saw infanticide and children abandoned at birth and built orphanages to take care of them. It was Christians who, out of compassion and justice, brought an end to slavery, who elevated the status of women, who cared for the needs of the poor, and who founded the world’s first hospitals. Christians started the majority of the world’s first universities—such as Oxford, Cambridge, and Harvard—so every person could learn, not just the elite. Virtues the ancient world despised—humility, forgiveness, and care for the vulnerable— became moral ideals, all because of the lifestyle of Christians, to the point that non-believing historian and sociologist Rodney Stark concluded, “Christianity did not win the world through wars but through their witness; they won the world through their love.”

- The fourth century Roman Emperor Julian the Apostate said, “Nothing has contributed to the progress of the superstition of the Christians as much as their charity to strangers... They support not only their own poor but ours as well.”
- In the modern world Nicholas Kristof, a New York Times columnist who traveled to Southeast Asia to help after a tsunami, said, “To my surprise, long before the rest of the world arrived to serve, the Christians were already there—running clinics, feeding people, caring for orphans. I’m a secular liberal, but I have learned to respect evangelical Christians. They are the ones who actually show up.”
- Paul Kingsnorth, who grew up a non-believer and later became a Christian, said, “I didn’t meet Christianity through arguments. I met it through people who lived differently.”
- Joe Rogan, the man who runs the most popular podcast in American for the last six years, who has never been religious, recently started attending church on a weekly basis, and he said, “People are cynical because they don’t want to believe in fairy tales and get duped...but Christians are the kindest people you are ever going to come across.”

Throughout recent history, many people have observed that the best evidence that Christianity is true is the lives of Christians—when we are filled with love, joy, and peace. Most of those changes throughout history didn’t come from famous Christians. They came from regular believers living faithfully in ordinary places. When we do that, we carry out our mission and help the world come to know Jesus!

Our Assignments

That leads to our third and final area of focus, our assignments. This is where Peter gets practical, where he steps on our toes and makes us uncomfortable. He gives us four specific assignments.

(1) Resist destructive temptations

“Abstain from sinful desires, which wage war against your soul” (1 Peter 2:11). Peter reminds us that we are in a battle. There are forces in the spiritual realm that are waging war against us, that are attacking us, that want to destroy us, so we need to abstain from the traps that are being set out in front of us. We must keep our distance from sinful desires, which attack all of us. When I was at the beach last week, there were people on the beach dressed in very provocative clothes. I had to abstain from the lustful temptation to objectify them. There were houses on the beach worth ten times the value of my house. I had to abstain from the selfish temptation to covet what those homeowners had. Every place we ate at offered us dessert. I had to abstain from the gluttonous temptation to overeat for the sole sake of pleasure. Maybe other people in the world are doing it, and celebrating it, but we have a different identity and mission than the rest of the world, so we shouldn’t live like the rest of the world! Our first assignment is to abstain from sinful desires, not out of rugged determination, but out of love for God!

(2) Honor worldly authority

- “Submit yourselves for the Lord’s sake to every human authority: whether to the emperor, as the supreme authority, or to governors, who are sent by him to punish those who do wrong and to commend those who do right” (1 Peter 2:13-14).
- “Honor the emperor” (1 Peter 2:17).

Have you ever noticed that people in our country don’t tend to respond very well when things don’t go their way with the government? Four years ago, a group of conservatives didn’t like the results of an election and believed the results were unfair. Several thousand stormed our capital building and sent politicians running in fear. In more recent days, federal officers in Minnesota have been sent to arrest people who are in America illegally, and a group of liberals who don’t agree with the way the law is being enforced banned together to disrupt operations, shutting down roads to impede officers, and storming a church building during worship to voice their displeasure. Those are examples from both sides of the aisle, with no commentary on the underlying events behind either example. These are simply well-known, modern situations that clearly communicate that, when people don’t get their way, they tend not to act very well. But that is not what God’s Word tells us to do. We are supposed to honor those in leadership over us and submit to their authority.

People often respond, “Ah, but I don’t like who the president is. I don’t agree with the leaders.” Notice this passage doesn’t give an exception clause that says we are only

supposed to honor the politicians who vote how we want! This was written during the Roman Empire, and the emperor who Peter instructed them to honor and submit to was Nero. He was a pedophile. He killed Christians. He would eventually order Peter's execution. Even though he was an incredibly unsavory leader, Peter told his listeners to submit to and honor worldly authority. We are fortunate enough to live in a democratic republic, where we get to elect our leaders. Given that we have a chance to influence the quality of leadership in our land, we should stay informed, we should vote, we should appeal to our leaders to make wise and godly decisions. But whether we like the people in office or not, as Christians, we submit to our leaders and honor them. Submission and honor don't mean agreement; it means we trust that God is sovereign and he will ultimately work all things together for the good. This week, when you see a headline that would normally solicit anger or outrage, try praying for the people behind the headline instead. In November, you can try to vote in a new leader, but as long as someone is the leader, we honor them, something this world has all but forsaken. That's what sets Christians apart; that's what wins Jesus a good name.

(3) Respect and love

"Show proper respect to everyone, love the family of believers" (1 Peter 2:17). Every person in the world should be shown proper respect by Christians. We treat everyone with kindness and class. We are gracious, we are patient, we are honest, we are sincere to all people. Everyone we ever meet was made in the image of God, so we respect all people. Whether or not they are respectful to us, whether or not they look like us, think like us, vote like us—we respect all people. Christians respect everyone, but we are specifically called to love the family of believers, which means that while Christians are caring and compassionate to everyone, we show unique and special concern for those in the church. The early church cared for everyone, but they provided sustained long-term care for the widows in their community, because they were part of the same church family. The Bible says that if a man does not provide for those who are in his own family, he has denied the faith and is worse than a non-believer. What's true of our biological family is also true of our church family. God wants us to truly and deeply love those in our faith family. Do you know anyone in our church right now who needs encouragement, a meal, a prayer, a ride, a listening ear? Meeting those needs is what God calls us to do!

(4) Fear of God

In 1 Peter 2:17, Peter gives us a direct command: "Fear God." This is very unpopular in pop-culture theology. People want to say, "We shouldn't live in fear of God, just snuggle up next to him. He wants to cuddle you and hold you close." The cabbage-patch version of God is popular today, but it's not biblical! The Bible teaches that God is tender and compassionate and he invites us to draw near to him. But the Bible also teaches that he is a consuming fire. Fires can keep you warm. But if you don't have a healthy respect for them, you'll also get burned. Some say that doesn't sound like Jesus, but listen to what Jesus himself says: "I will show you whom you should fear: Fear him who, after your body has been killed, has authority to throw you into hell. Yes, I tell you, fear him." Fearing God doesn't mean that we dread

God. It means that we love him and honor him and also live knowing that he has the power and will to punish those who mock and scorn him. My children love me. They run to me and hug me. But when their mother says, “I’m calling your father,” they shape up right away.” There is a healthy sense of fear—and it promotes wise and righteous living.

We began today by talking about what makes the church so special—it’s not the building, it’s the people: people who believe in Jesus, follow Jesus, and have been saved by Jesus, people who have been given a new identity, a new mission, and new assignments. When we live that way, it will bring God glory and bring others to come to know him!