Living as Exiles
1 Peter 2:11-25

Just think for a minute about where you spend most of your time: school, or university, or work. Or where you wished you spent most of your time – maybe time with friends, or out in the mountains. How are you supposed to live as a Christian as you do those things? Or what about your private inner world of your thoughts? I would guess that on the one hand you know that being a Christian means that you'll be different in some way from those around you - but on the other, you also know that you can be too different in wrong ways or for wrong reasons.

Well, tonight's passage tackles this issue what it means to live in the world as followers of Jesus.

Read: 1 Peter 2:11-25

Look at verse 11: 'Beloved, I urge you as sojourners and exiles to abstain from the passions of the flesh, which wage war against your soul.' What are the three ways Peter describes the Christians he's writing to? Beloved. Sojourner. Exile. What does it mean to be Beloved? A sojourner? An exile? [Turn into groups]

Beloved: Peter loves them. But more than that – God the Father loves them, the Lord Jesus loves them; the Holy Spirit loves them. They are beloved by God. *You* are beloved by God. And when you know that to the core of your being it can radically transform how you live.

Sojourner: someone away from home, staying somewhere temporarily. If you go and stay in an Airbnb – you're a sojourner; if you go backpacking around Europe – you're a sojourner, you're not a permanent resident.

An Exile: they belong to another country, living in this country, often they wish they could go back home, but for now, until things change, this is where they have to make their home.

So right at the heart of being a sojourner and an exile is this tension. They are like, but also unlike those they live among. They know that where they are now isn't home, they don't belong here, and that they're only temporary residents here. And yet, they bear no ill-will to the people around them. An exile doesn't view the people they're living among as enemies. I mean, an exile doesn't see himself as a spy behind enemy lines, does he? They haven't been parachuted in to blow up the railway lines. In fact, it's the opposite. An exile is often thankful for his new country. He may not like it all – it's not home after all – but he sees good where's there's good to be seen, he applauds and appreciates what he can, even while he might critique what he can't.

And Peter says, you are loved by God *and* you're a sojourner and an exile in this world. And because this world isn't your home you will also feel a tension as you live out what it means to be a Christian.

The Battle for the Interior

Verse 11 again, 'Beloved, I urge you as sojourners and exiles to abstain from the passions of the flesh, which wage war against your soul.' So, Peter says, knowing you're loved by God, and that this world isn't your home, don't give in to the passions of the flesh.

Great… but what are those? Well, think about that word *passions*. If someone is *passionate* about something, what does it mean? Or, if you had to ascribe a colour to the word *passion* what would it be? *Passion* is about what energizes, drives, or motivates us, isn't it? It's about our emotions, our longings, what we're ambitious for. And you can have passions that are strong and that are good: you can be passionate about social justice, or truth, or God; you can be passionate about your job; or if you're married about your husband or wife. But you can also have passions that are strong and wrong: the passions of the flesh, Peter calls them. And the flesh is that part of our nature, our inner person, the natural us, that's opposed to God, and that's enticed by sin.

But like our good passions, these wrong passions are still *passions* – they're not like taking a cold shower. These are things you want to do, that feel good, that make you feel alive. And… they also feel totally natural, because they are. They are totally natural to our fallen, broken, sinful nature – they are passions of our flesh So you don't have to try and get angry do you, it just comes. The self-centredness that wants what's best for you as opposed to others, comes naturally. That greed, or endless desire for the next thing, or that feeling of jealousy, or those sexual thoughts about that person, you don't have to conjure them up, do you? They're there before you know it, and they're strong.

And we live in an age when society tells you that you shouldn't resist these things that feel natural – that they're not wrong, it's resisting hem that's wrong. That the one thing you should trust are your innermost feelings - that you've got to be the authentic you.

But Jesus says something very different. He said that the way to thrive is not to be defined by your passions, but to deny yourself – that the way to *really* live is to take up your cross and die to yourself. And knowing that, Peter says these wrong passions war against your soul.

Can anyone tell me what this is? It's an eagle and it's been made to soar. And so have you, but like an eagle whose wings have been clipped these passions of the flesh war against your soul by keeping you earthbound – they pin you down to this life, by telling you that you need the stuff of this world to be really happy and satisfied in life - that this world is your home, and that you won't be happy unless you're having sex, or have that next gadget, or get your own back on that person, or hold on to your bitterness or make it financially, or unless you're pretty, or ripped. That you'll only be truly alive if you pursue and have *this*. Whatever *this* is. That the way to happiness is to feed the passions of your flesh.

So we all face this battle for the interior. Because the gospel teaches us that real and lasting fullness can never come through giving in to these desires because they're focused on stuff that can never last. Real fullness only comes by knowing

that you are loved and chosen and accepted by the only One whose opinion really matters, and who never changes, and that this world isn't your home – you're living for another. So don't give in to these wrong passions Peter says – abstain from them.

But here's the thing. Peter says, you have to fight this battle for the interior in a way that doesn't bring disgrace on the name of Christ: v12: 'Keep your conduct among the Gentiles honourable, so that when they speak against you as evildoers, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day of visitation.'

Now – can anyone tell me what this is? It's a tracker dog. What's it trained to do? To pick up a scent from miles away. And people can spot religious hypocrisy from miles away. So we can never claim to be different with our words, but our lives be anything but.

The Example of the Exterior

There's a danger in being a Christian, and that is to think that it's just an internal thing: that it's about me feeling good about myself, with church services designed to bless me. But the truth is very different. And when you know you're loved by God, and you're living for another world, how you live in this world is also going to be very different and it will show.

You see, imagine someone who gets their sense of worth from money or power or sex or their appearance. That will inevitably determine how they treat others, and use their resources, won't it? Live like that and you'll use people and stuff for your own gain and to boost your own ego.

And whilst people can be blind to those attitudes and behaviours in their own lives, they won't have any trouble spotting them in yours. Just think about it: you can spot someone else's selfishness a mile off, can't you? But not your own – for you, it's just a healthy self interest, the setting of good boundaries and so on! So if as Christians we are different in this world only in what we say, but not in who we are and how we live, others will spot that a mile away.

So, you've got to fight this internal battle in a way that leaves those on the outside not criticizing you for hypocrisy. And you can do that by allowing the Holy Spirit to work the good news of Jesus on your heart in such a way that it frees you to serve others, in acts of justice and mercy, rather than using them and serving yourself – what Peter calls in v12, 'good deeds.'

But when it comes to good works, there's a crucial difference between religion and the gospel. [Groups - how do religion and the good news of Jesus differ when it comes to good works?] Religion says, I've got to do good works to earn God's approval and get praise from others. But the Gospel says – God loves you and accepts you and approves of you because of what Jesus has done for you, not what you do. And now you're free to do the good works God has already prepared for you to do, and treat others with the same love and grace God has shown to you. And then, as Peter says in v12, God gets the glory, not you.

And Peter highlights two areas where the Gospel has the power to make us different in ways that will stand out for good. And the first is politics.

Politics

Now, when things matter to you, when you're passionate and bold about them in good ways, the danger is that you treat those you disagree with as enemies. But whilst Peter says the passions of our flesh are the enemies of our souls, he doesn't use the same language for our political leaders – he tells us to honour them. And given the situation these first century Christians faced, that includes those who oppose us and who we profoundly disagree with.

V13-14: 'Be subject for the Lord's sake to every human institution, whether it be to the emperor as supreme, or to governors as sent by him.'

What do you think he means by 'Be subject for the Lord's sake'? I think he means that there's a way of doing politics and relating to authorities, that glorifies God.

You see, when it comes to politics, left and right tend to denigrate or sneer at the other – because if you think that political power is the answer to the world's problems, then you'll naturally think your side has the answer, and you'll tend to talk down and despise the other, right or left.

But when you understand that the real issue is not politics but the human heart, then you know that neither left nor right has the total answer to humanity's problems, and that neither you, nor the latest politician, is the messiah, Jesus is. And that makes you humble about the answers politics and power can offer. But it also makes you humble about yourself, because you realize that you're no better than anyone else – not even those you disagree with. As Peter says in v25 'You were straying like sheep' – sheep for whom the shepherd had to die. So of all people we know we are no better than anyone else. And yet, knowing that Christ loves us and died for us should also makes you bold – because it frees us from the fear of others, and from ourselves. So when it comes to politics, we can stand up for truth and justice and integrity, even if that's unpopular, and even if it costs us.

So, when the gospel takes root in your heart it will influence the way you think and speak about politics and political opponents because it makes you bold and humble at the same time. And particular at the present time that could really make Christians stand out in good ways.

And Peter says in v15 that by doing good – by working for the common good and seeking the welfare of the city, we will 'put to silence the ignorance of foolish people.' So rather than being seen as puppets of left or right, Christians will be seen as adding value to society. A couple of years back I read something that said that a local church should be working in its community in such a way that the local authorities say 'if they were to move away, or go out of business, we'd have to put up taxes. We'd have to employ people to do what those Christians do for the good of our community.' And that's what Peter is talking about here.

And in this context of politics and the doing of good in communities, look what Peter says in v16 – because it's fascinating: 'live as people who are free.' And there are two traps Christians can fall into in not living as free: The trap of living as a prisoner of war, and the trap of living as a slave.

For a prisoner of war, there's a war going on – but he can't take part in it because he's been captured and herded together with his fellow soldiers. And despite the fact that lives are being lost all around, he lives in his own little world, wearing his uniform, but totally sidelined, waiting for deliverance at the end of the war. And sadly, as Christians we can choose to live like that too. We can exist in a kind of Christian ghetto, a Christian prisoner of war camp, wearing the uniform, waiting for God to deliver us from this terrible world, but totally sidelined.

But the second trap you can fall into is to live as a slave. Because a slave has little or no power to change anything, and so they can become demotivated – I can't change anything, I'm enslaved. But Peter tells us that in Christ we're free, and the only person you're enslaved to is God: v16 – 'living as servants [slaves] of God.' And a free person plays their part in the society and the community around them. They're not a prisoner and they're not a slave. And as Christians we can do that in ways that honour others, so no one can accuse us of being hypocrites.

But the second way we can set an example is how we behave when we're treated unjustly.

Unjust Treatment

And the example Peter gives is of servants and masters. Verse 18, 'Servants, be subject to your masters with all respect, not only to the good and gentle but also to the unjust.' Now, you might think, what has this got to do with me? I'm not a servant! Sure, but have you ever experienced being treated unjustly by those in positions of power over you? At school or at work? And if not yet, you probably will face that in the future. People might say things about you that you know are wrong, or show favouritism to others against you, or just treat you plain wrongly. And Peter says that is a golden opportunity to display this loved by God/sojourner/exile attitude of the Christian. Because, where you get your significance from, and what really matters to you – the world you are living for, shows itself at moments such as these.

I mean, remember a time when you were treated unjustly. What did you feel? Did you feel a desire, a passion to get your own back? To retaliate? To say something cutting? To treat them like they've treated you? But just listen to Peter: verses 20-1: 'If when you do good and suffer for it you endure, this is a gracious thing in the sight of God. For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you.' So Jesus suffered for you, Peter says, he loved you that much even though you don't deserve it, and when you know that deep down it is going to affect how you react when you get treated badly and don't deserve it. It's about how you do or don't speak about that rubbish teacher, who gives you a bad grade you don't deserve; it's about when you're overlooked, or sidelined at work. Does it rock you? Is the rug taken out from under your sense of inner peace and poise? Do

you join in with the chorus of complaints? Or, because you're rock solid secure in Christ, do you react differently?

Now, Peter isn't excusing injustice or bad masters – is he? He makes it very clear that there is a difference between good and bad and just and unjust. So he's not saying that anything goes. But there should be a radical difference between how we as Christians face these things and how the world does – because we recognize that ultimately, this life isn't about me and my rights and my life, and that my ultimate reward is not in this life at all. And that frees us to fight injustice with humility and endurance - and not just when it's unjust to me, but when it's unjust for others and I don't stand to gain anything by taking a stand.

And we can live like this Peter says, because of Jesus: v21-23, 'Follow in his steps… 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.' And v24, 'He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sins and live to righteousness.' So knowing his great love for us, knowing his unjust suffering for us, knowing his grace and forgiveness at work in our lives, we can fight the battle of the interior against wrong passions, and set an example to the world by right and good works.