How to Live and Why
1 Peter 4:1-11

I think it's true to say that you can go through stages of life when it feels like everyone's telling you what to do or, more accurately, what not to do. And not just when you're a teenager. You get to my age and it can feel like every article you read is telling you all the fun things you *shouldn't* be doing, if you want to live longer, *and* all the less fun things you *should* be doing if you don't want to get Alzheimer's. But there are also times, like when you're feeling a bit lost, when you wish someone *would* tell you what to do with your life.

Well, in today's passage, Peter does both. First, he tells us what we *shouldn't* do, then what we *should* do. But he also tells us *why*. And he does that for a reason. You see, when I was in secondary school I used to play a lot of chess. I'm interesting like that. And when you're playing in competitions, you play with a clock that has two faces. You make your move and then immediately hit the button that starts the other player's clock. And from that moment on, their time is ticking down.

And for Peter and the other apostles, the death and resurrection of Christ changed everything. Because when Christ rose from the dead it was him making *the* move in history, *the* move that started the clock, counting down to the end of history. And when you understand that, Peter says, it fundamentally changes what you do, don't do and why.

What Not to Do
Look at v3, 'For the time that is past suffices for doing what the gentiles want to do, living in sensuality, passions, drunkenness, orgies, drinking parties and lawless idolatry.'

How would you group those things together? Sensuality, passions, orgies… that's sex. And drunkenness and drinking parties… that's alcohol. The two things lurking behind almost every scandal in public life. Add money to the list and it would be pretty much complete, wouldn't it.

But not just scandals, but a whole load of our relational or personal problems. And many of us carry the scars, or open wounds, from when one of more of those things have come to dominate *our* lives or the lives of those we love. And the Bible has this vision for human thriving, and Peter's saying, 'and diet of alcohol and sex and money doesn't help you achieve that vision. It doesn't help you survive let alone thrive.'

Except, he doesn't mention money, does he. He finishes his list with *'lawless idolatry'*. Now, if you've visited any of the great Greek or Roman ruins, you'll know that their temples would have been beautiful. And so compared with drunkenness and orgies, the image of respectable Roman citizens burning incense to ornately carved statues of the gods in architecturally magnificent temples hardly seems so bad, does it?

But that's because the stuff that can eat away at our lives and erode our characters can seem very respectable. Think how the 10 Commandments begin: 'I am the Lord your God, and you shall have no other gods before me.' And Martin Luther argued that you don't break any of the subsequent commandments without first breaking that commandment. You don't break the commandment to put down your work and rest on the sabbath; you don't break the commandment to not lie, or endlessly want more money or stuff, or commit adultery without first committing idolatry and looking to your work, or the opinion of others, or possessions, or sexual intimacy, to give you what only God can give you. And so, whether you're worshipping an actual stone idol in a beautiful marble temple, or sacrificing your family for your work, or putting too much weight on your reputation or status in life, however respectable it might seem, idolatry is the gateway sin to all sin.

But, maybe you hear all that and think, yeh but there's the problem with religion, always telling us what *not* to do. And religion's moralistic and judgemental. As the American journalist H.L. Mencken said of Puritanism, religion has "the haunting fear that someone somewhere is having a good time."

And yet, if you think about it, our current secular culture and expressive individualism also has its moral code - things you mustn't do or say. Things that if you *do* do them, or say them, will result in you being be rapidly and publicly condemned and shunned and shamed.

And that's exactly what Peter's friends were experiencing. Verse 4, 'With respect to this they are surprised when you do not join them in the same flood of debauchery *and they malign you*.'

Now, as well as playing chess, I used to play rugby. And my friends and I got up to all the stuff the rugby crowd got up to. Until I became a Christian, and I stopped wanting to do it. And one of my friends said to me, 'Martin, you have become so *pious*.' And he didn't mean it as a complement! And Peter's saying to them, and us, don't be surprised by that, because it's not just Christianity that's got a view on what you shouldn't be doing. The question is, who's version are you going to listen to? Because there are differences.

Firstly, Christianity differs from secular culture in *what* you shouldn't do. You see, expressive individualism thinks, I should be free to do and be whatever I want. And what's sinful is anyone or anything that stops me doing that. Whereas Peter's taking aim at the stuff that ends up controlling and dominating us, and the idols that lie behind them. Because he knows that to really thrive everyone needs boundaries *and* that total freedom is ultimately enslaving.

Secondly, Christianity's different in its diagnosis of where the problem lies. You see, right back to Plato, secularism believes you're fundamentally good. That what stops you thriving is *outside* you. Christianity's much more realistic, because while it recognises the power of external influences, it also recognises *we're* part of the problem. That the problem lies inside us. That v2, it's our 'human passions', literally our *over*-desires, our wanting things like comfort or intimacy or security or reputation too much, or we're looking to fulfil them in the wrong things, that become destructive.

But thirdly, Christianity's different because of *why* you should stop doing things. Verse 1: 'Since therefore Christ suffered in the flesh, arm yourselves with the same way of thinking, for whoever has suffered in the flesh has ceased from sin.' Now, who arms themselves? People who are feeling threatened, or facing a battle. Both of which were true for Peter's friends - they're facing hostility for their Christian faith. But Peter's not calling them to take up physical arms, or man the barricades or retreat to a cultural bomb shelter. He's calling them to adopt a certain way of thinking. To think about life, and suffering, and hostility from others, the way Christ did.

You see, when Jesus suffered he knew he was suffering for our sins, in our place. And secular culture, and other religions, will say, 'stop doing *this* or *that* and you'll be accepted, you'll earn our or God's approval.' But Christianity says you can, and should, stop doing these things because you already have God's approval. You can be free of the power of this stuff that slowly eats away at your life, because Christ has suffered for you. And sins power over you has been broken. And you don't need to live any longer under its guilt or shame.'

But what about the approval you don't have? The approval of others, of the people maligning you?

Well, Jesus knew that if he was going to be obedient to the Father's will, he would suffer. And so, to think about suffering the way Christ did means, you've decided whose side you're standing on. Verse 2, 'So as to live for the rest of the time in the flesh no longer for human passions but for the will of God.' So to have Christ's mind to suffering or hostility is to say, I'm done with sin, and if I take some abuse for that from others, that's ok, because look at the abuse Christ took for me.

A friend of mine's a pastor and this week one of his church members called him a homophobe to his face. He's not, he's just trying, lovingly and graciously, to teach the Bible. So when he texted me to tell me I sent him back the prayer of George Whitefield, the great 18th century preacher: "God give me a deep humility, a well-guided zeal, a burning love and a single eye, *and then let men or devils do their worst."*

But sometimes, when you're being maligned the temptation to malign back can be strong, can't it? But not if you arm yourself with Christ's way of thinking. You see when he faced hostility he prayed for and forgave those who crucified him. But also, Peter says, v5, 'They will give an account to him who is ready to judge the living and the dead.'

And when you know that God will have the last word, you don't need to, which can break the cycle of insults. But you also don't need to compromise to stay in their good books, because you know that any praise they offer is going to be short lived in the light of eternity.

It's why Peter says what he says in v6. You see, these guys were experiencing a particular form of criticism. 'For this is why the gospel was preached even to those who are dead, *that though judged in the flesh the way people are*, they might live in the spirit the way God does.' And we know from Peter's second letter that they were being mocked for the fact that Jesus hadn't returned yet. And some of them had even died before seeing Christ's return, so what good had Christianity done them? 'So much for your death conquering saviour!'

And Peter's telling them, regardless of what your neighbours are saying about your dead brothers and sisters, regardless of how they're judging them, they're alive with God. So don't let the hostile comments get to you.

Ok, but if that's how *not* to live? What about the positive?

What To Do
Look again at v2: we're to live, Peter says, 'no longer for human passions *but for the will of God*.'

Now, when you hear that phrase, 'the will of God', what do you think of? Typically, we think in terms of 'Should I pursue this career or take that job? Should I marry this person or that one? I mean, what's God's will for my life!?'

But that's not how Peter's thinking. And in 1 Thessalonians, Paul wrote, 'this is the will of God: your sanctification' (4:3). You growth in personal holiness.

But, you do have a choice, Peter says, and it's binary. Live like everyone else wants to live *or* how God wants you to live. 'What the gentiles [pagans] want to do' (v3) or what God wants you to do. Be controlled by your over-desires or God's desires. That's the choice.

But notice how he begins. Verse 7, ‘The end of all things is at hand; therefore…’ And the resurrection and ascension of Christ has started the clock, and ever since we’ve been in the endgame, the last stage of God’s redemptive plan. And knowing that, Peter says, is going to profoundly change the way you live. Except, notice what he doesn’t say. He doesn’t say, the end is at hand so stockpile canned goods, or develop time lines to work out the dates of Christ’s coming. Nor does he say be consumed with anxiety about the state of the world.

Last week, I said how we’d been to the graduation ceremony for the final year medical students and how each one had been asked to provide a photo of where they’ll be in 10 years time. Well, no exaggeration but I think between a third to a half showed a picture referencing some version of climate change. Like them trying to ski on grass because there’s no snow, or standing knee deep in melted glaciers. All of which are genuine concerns. Though it was slightly ironic that the other half showed photos of themselves in various glamorous locations around the world, no doubt having flown there.

But in talking about the end, Peter’s not interested in stoking anxiety. Instead, v7, ‘The end of all things is at hand; therefore be self-controlled and sober-minded for the sake of your prayers.’

So, rather than let your desires control you, be self-controlled. Rather than get drunk on alcohol or sex, be sober-minded, and do it *for the sake of your prayers*.

Don’t you think that’s interesting? I mean, they’re facing hostility for their Christian faith, and the clock of history is ticking, so you might have thought that the reason for being clear-headed is to think hard and develop good apologetic arguments to persuade your non-Christian friends and neighbours. After all, Peter’s already said that we should be ready to give a defence for the hope that’s in us.

And yet, here, the outflow of knowing that Christ has dealt with our sin, and risen from the dead, and the end of all things is at hand, is a clear-headedness *that prays*.

Sexual immorality, and alcohol, and looking to things as idols don’t do that, do they? Because they cloud and dull our hearts and minds to eternal realities. And prayer becomes hard. Or non-existent. And Peter’s saying, ‘God’s will for your life is so much better than that. And it might be a daily battle, but as you think clearly and deeply about Christ’s love for you, and soberly about his return, it’ll light the fuse of your prayer life.

But prayer for what? Because Peter doesn’t tell us. But it’s not hard to guess, is it. Because when you or your friends are being maligned for your Christian faith, you’re going to find yourself praying for endurance. Like I am for my pastor friend. And because sin can have that clouding, dulling effect on our hearts, we’re going to be praying for God to fan the flames of love for him, more than love for sin. And we’re going to be praying for those who are doing the maligning, because that’s what Christ did.

So, what’s God’s will for your life? Clear minded prayer. But secondly, the end of all things is at hand, so, v8, ‘above all, keep loving one another earnestly, since love covers a multitude of sins.’ Does that mean sweeping sin and hurt under the carpet? Or becoming a carpet for the person whose hurt you to walk on? No.

Proverbs 10:12 says, ‘Hatred stirs up strife, but love covers all offenses.’ So, if love is the opposite of hatred, what’s the opposite of covering offenses? Stirring up strife.

Think how that works. Someone says something or does something and it hurts. How do you respond? Your passions, your pride, your woundedness say ‘get even, strike back.’ But the will of God says, ‘Don’t stir up strife. Instead, cover with love.’ Which is not pretending it didn’t happen. It happened so much the Son of God had to die for it. And if the person involved doesn’t repent and trust that Christ died for it, Peter’s already said they’ll die for it and be judged for it themselves. One way or another, justice has, or will, be done. And that frees you from being eaten up by the corrosive acid of bitterness, vengeance and strife.

And Peter says, we’re to love one another *earnestly.* By which he doesn’t mean, ‘with lots of emotion’, because that would rule out all the Englishmen. He means to not stop doing it. Because to love and cover when we’re hurting can be hard, but the alternative, the downward spiral of strife, is worse.

Thirdly, the end of all things is at hand, so, v9, ‘Show hospitality to one another without grumbling.’ Why pick that as a virtue to cultivate? Because it’s the opposite of the alcohol fuelled orgies of their day, or the hook-up culture of ours, both of which just use people. But also, to meet as churches these guys needed one another to open their homes. And that would have meant slaves and freemen, men and women mixing across social divides in your home. And Peter’s saying, open your homes to that by opening your hearts to that. Because when you’re facing growing hostility on the outside, or struggling with sin on the inside, everyone needs to know, that there’s a place for them on the inside.

Fourthly, the end of all things is at hand, so, v10, ‘as each has received a gift, use it to serve one another, as good stewards of God’s varied grace.’ Now, to be a steward is to be a manager of someone else’s property. And that property you’re to steward are the gifts and skills and resources God’s given you.

And Peter divides them into two groups. Verse 11, ‘whoever speaks, as one who speaks oracles of God; whoever serves, as one who serves by the strength that God supplies.’ So… Speaking and serving.

Which group do your gifts fall into? Or maybe you have gifts in both groups. Whichever, Peter’s reminding us, they’re God’s gifts. And they might be speaking gifts - like teaching kids in Sunday school, or youth in youth group, or with friends or family around the dinner table. Wherever it is, you’re good with words. And Peter’s saying, so be conscious of your words. You’re gifted, gifted to speak God’s words, on God’s behalf.

And I’ve said this before, but I’m better with words than Su or my girls. Though the girls are pretty feisty! So how am I going to use my words when we’re sat around the table? Am I going to speak in a way that tramples over them, so I can win every argument? Or, in the light of the end of all things, am I going to I use my words in such a way as to serve them?

Or maybe God’s gifted you practically. You have two hands and two feet, with a great eye for a chair nicely placed, so come join the set up team! Or you enjoy cooking, so have people over and strengthen the church… literally! You’re good socially, so join the welcome team, or invite people out. Whatever it is, Peter says serve *in God's strength*.

Why say that? I mean, if it's just a practical task do we really need to get all spiritual about it? Can't we just go, 'someone's got to do it, so it might as well be me', or 'let's just get this over with'? No, Peter says. As you serve be conscious of God. Be praying, 'God, equip and empower me, as I do this.' Because Peter doesn't just tell us what *not* to do or *what* to do. But thirdly…

Why to Do It

So… done with sin, we're going to be clear-headed and pray; we're going to love and show hospitality; we're going to speak God's words, and serve in his strength, v11, '*In order that* in everything God may be glorified through Jesus Christ. To him belong glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen.'

Now, notice how the list of things we *shouldn't* do ends with 'idolatry' (v3) and the false gods we're tempted to run after. But here, how the list of what we *should* do ends with God and his glory. Because knowing that Christ has risen, and reigns, and will come again, doesn't just change what you do, but why you do it.

You see, you could take your gifts and deploy them in service of… yourself. To get a bit of attention, the spotlight on 'me'. And we're serving the idol of self, or reputation, or significance. And Peter's saying, but when you're humbly looking to God for his strength, or conscious of speaking his words; and when you're praying, and lovingly seeking to cover others' sins; and when you're being hospitable and welcoming, you're on the path to living for God's glory and not your own. And that's a much better path to be on: for you, but also for others, because instead of using them, you're serving them.

Each morning, I use the Lord's Prayer as the basis of my prayers, taking one line a day. And that means that every Sunday morning, as I get up to pray, I'm back at the beginning: 'Our Father in heaven, *hallowed be your name*.' And typically I'll work my way through our time here together. Father, may your name be hallowed, may you be glorified in the set up, in class@9am, in the welcome that people receive, in the person leading the service, in the music and worship, in the reading or your word, and in our praying and in my preaching. God, whatever else happens, may you be glorified.

This week, think about doing the same. Not just for Sunday morning, but Monday through Saturday morning and afternoon and evening, in all your speaking and serving. And ask yourself, are there any areas where I'm not hallowing God's name or living for his glory? Any sins or idols I need to be done with? Is there someone I need to forgive and ask God's help to cover their sin? Or maybe ask yourself, who can I show hospitality to this week - by meeting them for lunch and encouraging and befriending them. And whatever the Lord lays on your heart do it not to earn his favour but knowing that in Christ you already have his favour.

So… Christ died for your sins, he's risen and reigning and will come again. Let that change the what and the why of your life.