

In the Land of our Sojourn: A New Citizenship

1 Peter 2:11-17

Preached by Minister Jason Tarn at HCC on August 24, 2014

Introduction

- ❖ Traveling the world is a real eye-opening experience. I know many of you have had that privilege. Some of you students were doing just that this summer. You were off traveling in Europe or Asia or some other distant land. I'm sure it was eye-opening for you. It's a great chance to learn more about other cultures. But you also learn a lot about yourself and about your own culture and how it clashes in some ways with the culture you're visiting and yet in some ways they correspond.

- ❖ **For any of you with extensive experience traveling in another country, you know what it's like to stand out as an American even as you do your best to fit in.** I was in China one summer. Obviously I shared the same ethnicity as everyone else. You'd think that if I just kept my mouth shut (so no one could detect my infantile ability to speak Mandarin), then I'd easily pass as a local. But no, I was a dead ringer for an American because I was always wearing shorts. Apparently guys in China don't wear shorts even in the heat of summer.
 - **And then there are times when you're living in another country and you simply refuse to conform to certain aspects of their culture because of allegiance to your own.** I lived in Canada for over six years, and I refused the entire time to use the metric system. Yes, I drove on their roads. Yes, I checked their forecasts. And yes, I never really knew how far things were or what the weather was like. Miles and Fahrenheit. That's what I use. I'm an American.

- ❖ This is what you can expect as a traveler or as a temporary resident living in a host country. You do what you can to fit in to the new culture, to identify points of similarity and common cause, to earn the respect and esteem of your new neighbors. But all the while, you're still different. You stand out deliberately or not. You still have a distinct identity as a foreigner.
 - If you've had this kind of experience traveling and living abroad, it's eye-opening. It especially opens your eyes up to see what it's like to live faithfully as Christians in this world. We've been in 1 Peter and learning about our new identity as Christians and how that informs the way we live in and engage the secular culture around us.

- ❖ So far we've seen Peter identify Christians in a variety of similar yet distinct ways. He starts in chapter 1:1 calling us "*elect exiles*". In 1:3 he describes us as those born-again into a new family where God is Father and we are recipients of a great inheritance. Similarly in 1:14 he calls us "*obedient children*". In chapter 2:5, we're called a "*spiritual house*" (temple) and a "*holy priesthood*". In 2:9, we're a "*chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for [God's] own possession.*"
 - **So there's a clear sense in which Christians ought to see themselves as members of a new family and a new country** (new nation, new kingdom of priests). So even though we're living out our discipleship to Christ here in this world, in this particular country – our allegiance is ultimately to another family, another country. In that sense we ought to see ourselves as "*sojourners and exiles*" (2:11).

- ❖ In this morning's text, I see three ways in which our lives are to be informed and shaped by this new identity: **1) As sojourners, Christians are to live distinctly strange lives. 2) As exiles-in-residence, Christians are to live compellingly attractive lives. 3) As slaves of God, we are to live freely submissive lives.**

Living Distinctly Strange Lives

- ❖ Let's begin by considering the idea of being a sojourner. In Scripture, we're often described as sojourners, and in that sense we're strangers. This is one way to tell if you're a Christian. A Christian is not a native to this world. Yes, a Christian is in this world but he/she is not of this world (Jn. 17:16). **A Christian is a sojourner, and for that reason, a Christian will live a life that is considered distinctly strange to natives of this world.**
- ❖ Many of you immigrated to this country. You're from another country, another culture, and for many years your way of life still reflected that country, that culture. And let's be honest, you were considered strange.
 - When you invited those American friends over to your place for the first time, and they saw that plastic wrap over your couch, your Saran-wrapped remote control, or your dishwasher being used as a dry rack, they probably didn't tell you but they totally thought you were strange. **The lifestyle of sojourners, foreigners, visitors will always be considered somewhat strange by citizens of the host country.**
- ❖ This is what Peter is preparing us to expect. In v11, he tells his readers to abstain from the passions of the flesh. And for that, they'll be a cost. Peter goes on to say, in v12, that people will rain down accusations and insults. **Notice how he says *when* – not *if* – people speak against you as evildoers.** So it's inevitable. You will be seen as strange and insulted for it.
 - Later in chapter 4:4, Peter tells Christians that all their pagan friends – with whom they use to party before they met Jesus – will be “*surprised when you do not join them in the same flood of debauchery, and they [will] malign you.*” If you're going to “*abstain from the passions of the flesh*” (2:11), your nonChristian friends won't understand, and they're likely to malign you.
- ❖ Now you might be thinking, “Of course they won't understand. Of course they'll malign me...if I carry myself like I'm holier-than-thou. If I go around raining condemnation on them, thumping them with the Bible.”
 - Granted that's true. Many Christians bring insult upon their own heads by virtue of their overbearing, belligerent attitudes. Riding around on a high horse looking their noses on every nonChristian they meet. If you act like that, then you can expect people to reject you.
- ❖ **But Peter's point here is that even if you're cordial to nonChristians, even if you're compassionate and humble in your approach, there will still be people who will react badly.** You'll still be rejected. Not necessarily because of your attitude or approach. It's simply because of your faith – of the object of your faith. Because of the gospel of grace.

- ❖ Christians are Christians because we've discovered that the only way to know God and have a relationship with him is to admit you're weak. To confess that you're spiritually bankrupt and have nothing to offer to win his favor or to prove yourself worthy of his love. Christians understand that salvation is all a gift of grace. We know this. But we didn't always.
 - **Before you became a Christian you thought that the people connected with God are the very holy, the very virtuous, the very disciplined, the very religious.** You thought it would take an extraordinary moral effort on your part to be close to God. But then you became a Christian.
 - You changed. And your thinking changed. You realized it's the other way around. It's actually the people who confess their inability, who admit their weakness, who recognize they are sinners and all their hope is in Jesus Christ. They're the Christians. They're the ones who know God.

- ❖ But here's the problem. NonChristians in the world don't know that yet. They don't see things that way – otherwise they'd be Christians. They still believe as you once believed. So when they hear you say, "I know God. I'm in a relationship with God." **They assume you feel morally superior to them.** "You must think you have such a good life to have proved yourself worthy of God's love. If you think you know God and I don't, then you must think you're better than me."
 - That's the kind of response you can expect. Your nonChristian friends are going to be surprised when you no longer join them in their sin, when you abstain from the passions of the flesh. "Oh you must think you're better than me now. You're such a good person and that's why you're so close to God and I'm not."

- ❖ Do you see? They think as you once thought, that a person is saved by the goodness of his or her life. **They don't understand the gospel – that you're saved not by the goodness of your life but by the goodness of Christ and his perfect life counted to you by faith.**
 - So don't be surprised. That's what Peter says in chapter 4. Don't be surprised when insults comes upon you. Don't act as though something strange were happening to you (4:12). If you're insulted for the name of Christ, that's to be expected.

- ❖ But of course this all presumes that you *are* living a distinctly strange life in the eyes of your nonChristian colleague. That you're not joining them in the same flood of debauchery, which Peter specifies in chapter 4:3 as "*living in sensuality, passions, drunkenness, orgies, drinking parties, and lawless idolatry.*"

- ❖ Is this true of you? Are you putting aside your former practices? Are you abstaining from the passions of the flesh, which wage war against your soul? **Notice how Peter assumes if you're a Christian then there's a war being waged in your soul.** The desires of the flesh are waging war against the desires of the Holy Spirit in you (Gal. 5:17).
 - But if there's a quite calm in your soul, if there's no battle waging against sin and temptation, then yes, you're at peace. But it's not a peace with God. You're at peace with your own sin and that means you're not yet a Christian.

Living Compellingly Attractive Lives

- ❖ A Christian is a sojourner who abstains from the passions that characterize this present world, who lives a distinctly different life, which the culture will view as distinctly strange. **But at the same time, when the world meets a real Christian, they will detect something strangely compelling and attractive.** This leads to our second point.
 - As exiles-in-residence, Christians are to live compellingly attractive lives. This is what I find so interesting. **Peter is saying that when the culture is faced with a real Christian in front of them, they're conflicted.** On one hand, they're turned off. They consider you strange. But on the other hand, they're attracted. They're something about you that draws them – not to you but to God.

- ❖ Just look at v12 again. “*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.*” So Peter is safely assuming that the Gentiles (the unbelieving world) will consider you strange and speak against you. **But by keeping your conduct honorable in their sight, Peter suggests that some unbelievers may see your good deeds and end up becoming Christians who end up glorifying God.**
 - “*On the day of visitation*” is referring to the day when Jesus returns and visits us once again. It'll be a day of judgment, but Peter's hope is that many of these unbelievers will be believers when that day arrives – in part because they observed the good works being done by Christians.
 - Peter's point is that Christians are to live such a honorable way of life that even those who speak against you can't help but recognize the goodness of your conduct.

- ❖ Now the fact that certain Christian behaviors will be seen as good and honorable by those in the world suggest that there is some overlap between the Christian and nonChristian view and value of what is considered *good*.
 - This is a really important point. As Peter is confronted with the values of the prevailing culture in his day, he doesn't throw it all out as incompatible with Christianity. Yes, there is incompatibility. There's much that a Christian must not conform to and must abstain from. Yet there are areas of common ground and common cause.

- ❖ **There are common values that Christians and nonChristians can agree on.** To some degree, there's a common understanding of *good* and *good conduct* between Christianity and secular society. Of course nonChristians won't attribute these values of theirs to the Christian God. They'll say any common ground is because of coincidence.
 - But we know it's because of creation and common grace. **Christians and nonChristians share certain values in common because we share the common image of our Creator.** We're made in his image, which is why certain moral truths are highly regarded even by an unregenerate soul.

- ❖ This leads Peter to presume that the unbelieving world will recognize something good and honorable about the Church. But sadly that's not always the case. **You could argue that the greatest problem facing the Church today is that we lack a compelling witness in the eyes of secular society.** That the average nonbeliever sees the Church as distinctly strange – but sadly that's it. They don't see anything they'd consider compellingly attractive.
 - And it's because the Church is rarely seen these days as a community of faith committed to the common good. If we're perceived as only being interested in self-preservation, preserving our way of life, our political power and cultural influence, then our message will be perceived as parochial, self-serving, and irrelevant to the outside world. Sadly this has been the case, and this is why we've lost credibility.

- ❖ Just ask: ***How did Christianity gain such ground and such cultural influence over the entirety of Western civilization?*** Before Constantine, before the Holy Roman Empire, before the Church had a drop of political power, you had early church bishops and pastors so closely identifying with the poor and marginalized in their communities, that they earned the respect and the right to speak for their local communities. It was the Church coming up with things like hospitals and orphanages. No one had ever thought of such things.
 - It took a community of believers who believed in and worshiped a God who is everything but made himself nothing by taking on the form of a servant (Phil. 2:7). A God who is rich yet for our sake became poor (2 Cor. 8:9). It took a people transformed by the gospel.

- ❖ The early church was a community of faith committed to the common good. Especially ministry to the poor and lowly in society. And society took notice. **These Christians lived lives that were radically different than their neighbors, and yet they were radically committed to advancing their good.**
 - That's how the Church developed a compelling witness. Christians were viewed as strange and yet strangely attractive. People would see these good deeds being done in the name of a Christ and end up giving glory to the Father in heaven (2:12; Mt. 5:16).

- ❖ **Friends, I'm convinced that the key to recovering the Church's influence and witness is to recover our commitment to serving the good of our cities and communities, especially the poor and marginalized.** This is why we've focused this year on being a church "*For the City*". This is why we organize annual Compassion Projects where we raise awareness and resources to benefit various compassion initiatives in the city.
 - We don't see these type of ministries as a distraction from our church's commitment to evangelism and discipleship. Rather, as we see in v12, the good deeds we perform that serve the common good are actually a benefit to our mission to evangelize and disciple because they strengthen our credibility and adorn the gospel we proclaim.

- ❖ When we are pursuing the common good of our city, living by the good values of secular society that are compatible with Christianity and abstaining from the ones that are not – by living this way we'll maintain a distinctly strange yet compellingly attractive identity.

- **In this way, we're clear about our true citizenship being in God's heavenly city which is to come, and yet we can say, with all honesty, that we're striving to be the best possible citizens in our earthly city of residence.** Our eyes are fixed on heaven as citizens of the city of God, and yet our hands and feet are on earth ready to serve the common good as model citizens in the city of man.

Living Freely Submissive Lives

- ❖ This idea of being the best possible citizens – model citizens – is where Peter goes next in vv13-17. He takes his exhortation to keep your conduct honorable among the nations and applies it specifically to your citizenship in the city of man.
 - Really vv13-17 are part of a larger section from chapter 2:13 to chapter 3:7 where Peter is addressing a Christian's civic life, work life, and home life. He says that the good you do in public will be observed by unbelieving governors (2:14), unbelieving masters (2:18), and unbelieving husbands (3:1). The hope is that these watching unbelievers will be won over to Christ by the honorable conduct of Christ's followers.
- ❖ With our remaining time, let's consider up to v17 and the issue of civil obedience. This is our third point: **Operating out of our identity as slaves of God** (which I see at the end of v16, "*living as [slaves] of God*"), **Christians are to live freely submissive lives, particularly in relation to civil authorities.** Let's read vv13-14, "¹³*Be subject for the Lord's sake to every human institution, whether it be to the emperor as supreme, ¹⁴or to governors as sent by him to punish those who do evil and to praise those who do good.*"
 - In those days, the Roman Empire was a fairly accepting of minority religious groups. There was the official religion of Rome, a pantheon of Roman gods and goddesses. But there were a whole host of mystery religions and minority groups like Christians. Rome allowed you the freedom to worship. They had no issue with the religious. But they had zero tolerance for the rebellious. Any movement or group that encouraged civil disobedience was quickly squashed with unrelenting force.
- ❖ **Well out of the many accusations against the early church, one of the most serious was the charge of insurrection.** Christians were always talking about their worship of another King and not Caesar. Some of their worst critics were casting them as radical revolutionaries who sought to upend the entire social order.
 - These accusations led many of the early Christian leaders to specifically address the relationship between Christians and governing authorities. That's why Paul wrote Romans 13. That's why Matthew, Mark, and Luke all record Jesus' teaching on rendering to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, namely taxes. And that of course is why Peter wrote this passage.
- ❖ **Christians are a people under authority. We subject ourselves under the authority of earthly rulers.** Peter is comprehensive in his scope. He says "*every human institution*". And he goes on to include the emperor and his provincial governors. Now remember, at the time of writing, the Caesar he had in mind was likely Nero, who hated Christians.

- By implication, that means we can't limit our submission and honor to just the rulers who are favorable to us, to just Christian politicians or the ones we voted for. Our subjection to the authority of rulers is blind to party affiliation or party platform. All governing authorities have governing authority over us.
- ❖ **But of course this is *not* an absolute authority since we're instructed to submit to them for the Lord's sake.** The Lord is our ultimate authority. So there is still a place for civil disobedience if earthly rulers ever pressure us to compromise our allegiance to Christ. **But it still stands that to the extent that the will of earthly rulers do not oppose the will of the Lord, we are duty-bound as Christians to obey.** It's a duty we give to God.
- Peter roots this obedience in God's will. Look at v15, "*For this is the will of God, that by doing good you should put to silence the ignorance of foolish people.*" Peter's hope is that the good attitude and submissiveness of Christians will end up silencing the slander and false accusation of critics. They'll realize they have no basis to accuse you of evil or wrongdoing.
 - This is God's will, God's rationale, for enjoining our submission to civil authorities. So when we obey *them*, it's really God we're choosing to obey.
- ❖ **This means our submission is not rendered out of a position of weakness but of strength.** In fact, Peter goes on to say that it's a submission rendered out of a position of freedom. Look at v16, "*Live as people who are free, not using your freedom as a cover-up for evil, but living as servants of God.*" Peter is telling his readers to subject themselves to the emperor – not because they're enslaved to him – but because they're free! Christians have been ransomed by the blood of Christ. We belong to Jesus now. So we are free to freely submit.
- **Yes, we are free in Christ, but Christian freedom does not mean a throwing off of authority.** It means we're free to choose to submit to a way of life that honors God, which means a life that honors the civil authorities God has ordained in our lives.
- ❖ When I was living in Vancouver, I had opportunities to minister to a few churches in Seattle. Speaking at their retreats, oftentimes to high school and college students. I acutely remember one issue that some students were dealing with. As we know the drinking age in the States is 21, but when these underage Christians crossed the border to Canada, suddenly they find themselves in a country where you can legally drink starting at 19.
- To many of these students, it all seems rather arbitrary. These laws appear to just be man-made. They're tempted to think, "God's law only speaks of avoiding drunkenness. There's nothing about age limits. So I'm free in Christ. I'm not doing this in the context of a drinking party. It's not leading to anything immoral. I know I'm underage but it's harmless."
- ❖ But that kind of thinking is exactly what Peter was referring to when he warned against "*using your freedom as a cover-up for evil*". **As a Christian, your freedom in Christ doesn't mean a freedom to disregard human laws and only concern yourself with abiding by God's law.**

- It means the freedom to abstain, the freedom to say no, the freedom to submit to human laws. Because as a sojourner, an exile, and a slave of God, you're no longer living for yourself, to indulge the passions of your flesh. You're living to bring honor to God and to add credibility to his gospel in the eyes of your non-believing friends.

- ❖ If they observe you drinking underage, if your nonChristian classmates see you bending the law and conducting yourself in like manner to themselves – *how likely are they to walk away from an encounter with you and glorify your Father in heaven?* They might think more highly of you now because you're more like them, but is the conduct of your life helping them think more highly of God, of your Lord Jesus Christ?

- ❖ This is a question for all of us. The same things could be said about traffic laws, texting while driving, tax codes, immigration laws, school zoning laws, etc. These kinds of man-made laws are subject to constant revision. They change state to state. They seem rather arbitrary and harmless to violate. Everyone fudges. Everyone does it.
 - And that's the point. **If everyone disregards a statutory law and considers it frivolous, then it's the Christian who should be the one person who keeps it.** Otherwise, in what sense are we distinctly strange or compellingly attractive if we do exactly as the world does?

- ❖ I know I sound like just another preacher calling Christians to be law-abiding, model citizens. That is what I'm doing. I do think Christians ought to be the best possible citizens in our earthly cities of residence. But not because I think that's the heart of Christianity. Not because I think that's the essence of the gospel.
 - It's because this text is saying that your conduct, including your submissiveness to civil authorities, goes a long way in commending the very gospel that we desperately want others to hear, to consider, and to believe.