

First Christian Church (Lawrence, KS)
Dr. Barry M. Foster
May 31, 2020

People of Honor

1 Peter 2:11-17 (EHV)

11 Dear friends, I urge you, as aliens and temporary residents in the world, to abstain from the desires of the sinful flesh, which war against your soul. 12 Live an honorable life among the Gentiles so that even though they slander you as evildoers, when they observe your noble deeds, they may glorify God on the day he visits us.

13 Submit to every human authority because of the Lord, whether to the king as the supreme authority 14 or to governors as those who have been sent by him to punish those who do what is wrong and to praise those who do what is right. 15 For this is God's will: that you silence the ignorance of foolish people by doing good. 16 Do this as free people, and do not use your freedom as a cover-up for evil, but use it as servants of God. 17 Honor everyone. Love the brotherhood. Fear God. Honor the king.

(NLT)

11 Dear friends, I warn you as "temporary residents and foreigners" to keep away from worldly desires that wage war against your very souls. 12 Be careful to live properly among your unbelieving neighbors. Then even if they accuse you of doing wrong, they will see your honorable behavior, and they will give honor to God when he judges the world.

13 For the Lord's sake, submit to all human authority—whether the king as head of state, 14 or the officials he has appointed. For the king has sent them to punish those who do wrong and to honor those who do right.

15 It is God's will that your honorable lives should silence those ignorant people who make foolish accusations against you. 16 For you are free, yet you are God's slaves, so don't use your freedom as an excuse to do evil. 17 Respect everyone, and love the family of believers. Fear God, and respect the king.

(NIV)

11 Dear friends, I urge you, as foreigners and exiles, to abstain from sinful desires, which wage war against your soul. 12 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.

13 Submit yourselves for the Lord's sake to every human authority: whether to the emperor, as the supreme authority, 14 or to governors, who are sent by him

to punish those who do wrong and to commend those who do right. 15 For it is God's will that by doing good you should silence the ignorant talk of foolish people. 16 Live as free people, but do not use your freedom as a cover-up for evil; live as God's slaves. 17 Show proper respect to everyone, love the family of believers, fear God, honor the emperor.

[Slide 1]

Opening

Good morning church! Sometimes a song has a way to get a message to us that might otherwise be ignored. The song we just sang, or at least heard, is one of those kinds of songs. “*Did we bring honor to the words we sing?*” That’s really the question for us every week—does our worship connect with our daily lives? Are we living in such a way that the things we sing on Sunday are on display for all to see from Monday through Saturday? Does what we say we believe on Sunday affect the daily decisions and choices we make during the rest of the week?

Peter’s letter to these young Gentile Christians makes this same point. He reminds them of crucial truths that they need to understand—about the resurrection of Christ; about the hope that they have in Christ because they have been born again; about God’s holiness and the judgment that awaits everyone; about faith that has been tested and obtains the salvation that allows them to face judgment unafraid.

But knowing these truths isn’t enough. They have to be translated into conduct, patterns of living, ways of thinking, habitual responses, daily choices. So Peter emphasizes our need for personal holiness. As those who have been born again, who have tasted that the Lord is good and have received the good word of the gospel, we are urged to grow up into that salvation, to continue to follow after Jesus Christ so that we increasingly look like him.

[Slide 2] *Review*

Last week, we looked at chapter two, verses 4-10, this rich and immensely important picture of the church as the new people of God. We are living stones, Peter says, built upon the living stone of Christ, who is the foundation, being fitted together to form a temple in which God himself lives by his Spirit. We are his people, a holy priesthood belonging to the king of the universe. We give him praise and glory, declaring who he is and what he has done. Our transformed lives testify of his grace and become instruments of praise that point to the God who has saved us and can save others just like us.

Again, all of that has to be translated from doctrinal truths, beliefs we hold, into lived-out truths, convictions that shape our decision-making, our attitudes, our habits, and our ordinary choices.

Which brings us to our passage for today.

[Slide 3] *Introduction*

Peter opens this section by reminding his readers of something he stated at the very start of his letter and repeated in verse 17 of chapter one: we are aliens in this world. Not extra-terrestrials, but people who live in a place that is not their home. We belong to heaven, though we live in this world. We belong to the kingdom of God, though we live in a country that is ruled by others. We are sojourners, exiles, pilgrims passing through, who are not looking to be assimilated to the prevailing culture. We are not looking to settle down and take root in this world, because our home is elsewhere, and we take our cues from our homeland and its king.

[Slide 4]

So he urges his readers (and us!). The NLT translates this, “*I warn you.*” How do you respond to an urgent warning? I suppose it depends upon how you regard the one giving the warning. Do you see the person as credible? Knowledgeable? Plenty of people dismiss serious, urgent warnings—and it costs them their lives (and sometimes, as we’ve discovered lately, the lives of others). I once did the funeral for a woman who ignored the doctors’ advice to get treatment for her breast cancer. When she died he said to me, “This could have been treated very easily and successfully.” But for whatever reason, she chose to dismiss his urgent warning. And she paid the price for her stubbornness. There are always consequences for ignoring warnings.

Another good question is whether this person cares for you or not. We’re more likely to listen to a warning that comes from a person we trust, someone who knows us, cares about us, and wants what is best for us.

God says, “*I’ve got a serious warning for you.*” Because you are my special treasure, my beloved people, the people in whom I have chosen to live—I want you to know something that is urgent, and of great importance.

[Slide 5] *The war against your soul*

What is his warning? You have an enemy who is targeting you with weapons that are aimed at your soul, weapons that will bring great destruction into your life if you don’t combat them. Those weapons are sinful desires—the lusts of this world: for pleasure, for possessions, for power, for position.

Not every desire is sinful. But make no mistake. Our desires, even our good desires, are easily corrupted and turned into self-indulgent cravings. They pervert your thinking, distort your sense of what is good, feed your fears, erode your personal integrity, and strengthen the hold of the enemy on your vulnerabilities. Those desires become spiritual cancers that multiply and rampage through your soul—intent on destroying you.

[Slide 6]

So Peter says, “*Abstain from sinful desires.*” You are not a prisoner of your desires. The heart may want what the heart wants, but you are not an animal, driven by instincts over which you have no control. You are created in the image of God. You were made new by the Spirit of God who lives in you. You are empowered by his Spirit to say, “NO!” to those cravings and habitual desires that reflect the sinful, corrupted self that constantly seeks only to satisfy itself.

If you understand that those self-centered desires are not neutral, but poisoned arrows that will kill you if you entertain them, then it’s easier to say, “*Nope! I’m not falling for that again.*” Let me give you a silly example from my own life that illustrates the point really well.

Mary and I used to drive from Iowa to Lawrence to watch our son play football for KU. Every home game for four years, we would pack up the car on Friday night after she got home from school, drive for six or seven hours and crash at a relative’s home, get up the next day, go to the game, see Jeff for a little while afterwards, and then get back in the car to drive home so I could preach the next morning. (A few times we got to stay another night, but we still had to drive back.) One of our regular stops on those trips was a QT convenience store in Des Moines. Every time we stopped there for a bathroom break, I walked past the grill, where there were these hot dogs and sausage taquitos and various things rolling around on the grill. They smelled really enticing. But I generally passed them by.

But once, they were on sale. And I was hungry. So I gave in to the desire, bought two of those taquitos and got back in the car, excited to satisfy these new longings that had been aroused by smell. The first bite was decidedly disappointing. And the rest of it was just awful. My desires had led me horribly astray. My stomach felt terrible the rest of the night. The only positive thing I gained from the experience was a heightened resolve to never make that mistake again.

That’s a relatively innocent example of desires that wage war against you. In the end, that particular moment of weakness didn’t cost me all that much. But I could tell you about other times when the toll from the war on my soul was much

higher. And you could do the same. You have seen the damage in your own life or in the life of someone you know well when the failure to abstain from fleshly passions led to destructive, even catastrophic results.

[Slide 7] *Live honorable lives*

Instead of living simply to satisfy your desires for pleasure, or your desire to be wealthy, or powerful, or important, Peter says, “*Live honorably.*” Live a life that is characterized by the pursuit of that which is good, that which exemplifies the values and ways of the kingdom of God.

Aretha taught us a little about the importance of respect, especially of the importance of respecting women as people, rather than thinking of them as objects. All of us want to be respected. But we’ve turned that desire for respect into something that is deadly. Peter says, instead of demanding respect from others and threatening those who don’t give it to you, or scheming your whole life to show them up, live a life that wins respect because you give yourself to doing good. Instead of pursuing the attention and praise of people as a way to feel better about yourself, pursue the things that bring praise to God. Your life will be far better; you’ll bring good to the world around you; you’ll actually make a lasting difference that extends beyond your own lifetime, and even into eternity. You will receive praise from God, which is far better than any accolades you might receive from others. As a side benefit, you will feel better about yourself.

[Slide 8]

Do you understand that God is shaping us as individuals—living stones—to become more like Christ, the Living Stone? Do you understand that he is building us as a people to be a temple for the worship of God—a people who live to bring praise to God, whose lives both personally and corporately are a testimony to declare to the world who God is and what he has done? Well, if we understand that, then it follows that our lives should reflect that purpose; the point of being alive changes from self-preservation or self-indulgence to honoring God by living honorably. The reason for being here on this planet is not just to take up space or to fill a role at an industry for a few years before they cart me off to the assisted living wing at a nursing care facility. We’re not here simply to make a name for ourselves, or even to extend our family name by having children and grandchildren. The point of our lives is not even the improvement of the human race or benefitting society in some general way—though that would certainly be better than just living to consume.

No, if we understand that God has made us a people—his people, his new temple, his dwelling place—then our lives have an entirely different purpose. We

are to be people of honor, as individuals, and a people of honor, as a corporate whole. Why? The metaphor of the temple tells us.

[Slide 9] *A temple to display the gospel*

Temples are not obscure or minuscule. They are grandiose, massive, majestic. They are intended to draw attention. They are symbols, signs that point to the God they represent.

The cathedrals of Europe are a great example of this, especially the grand Gothic cathedrals, whose spires and arches are designed to draw your eyes upward to heaven as a reminder that our thoughts and our lives are to be focused on God. The builders of those cathedrals understood that the church represented more than a social organization. It was the place where you could encounter God, where the story of God's salvation could be heard. So they filled the building with symbols—statues and stained glass windows that told the story of the gospel to people who could not read.

[Slide 10]

That is what we are—a cathedral for the world to see. When we live as God's people, people in whom the Spirit of God lives, the gospel is on display. We are the stained glass windows for people who cannot read. We are a giant posterboard or flat screen television for the world to see who God is and what he is like. Our lives offer the proof that Jesus is alive—because he can be seen in us when we live for him. When we live as people of honor, people whose lives display what it looks like to live honorably in the midst of a world of people who are bent inward upon themselves, we offer evidence of the credibility of the gospel to people who do not know or believe the gospel. The evidence of our changed lives offers them a reason why they should consider embracing the message of Christ. That evidence offers them hope, because they can see what the gospel has done in us, ordinary people—just like them—who have been transformed by the power of God because we were born again and shaped as living stones, set upon the foundation of Jesus Christ and fitted together by the Spirit of God.

[Slide 11] *Honoring authorities*

What does that look like in real life? What are some ways that we can live honorably? Peter offers us a couple of examples. The first is this: honor the governing authorities by submitting to their rule. For his readers in the first century, this meant acknowledging the authority of Caesar and the provincial governors appointed by him or by the Roman Senate, who ruled the provinces in Caesar's name.

We live in a democratic republic, which is an entirely different kind of government. For us, the primary governing authority is the Constitution of the United States, and the system of laws and institutions established by that Constitution. Our nation is grounded in the rule of law rather than in the rule of a person. But the basic principle still applies. Peter's command to submit to the authorities means, "*Don't be a rebel. Don't try to subvert the government or operate outside of the law. Don't try to find a way to get away with evil.*"

The essential quality of a rebel is this: I am determined to be the only authority in my life. I answer to no one else. No one is the boss of me. The apostle Peter says, "*That's not how a follower of Christ lives.*" First of all, because you've surrendered your life to Jesus Christ, who *is* the boss of you. And second, because the authorities (as a general rule) are set up to restrain evil conduct and promote the general welfare of the nation or community, which benefits the kingdom of God and makes sharing the gospel easier. So for the Lord's sake, for the sake of commending Jesus and the gospel to the world, Peter says, submit to the authorities.

[Slide 12]

Now, the church has a long and proper history of civil disobedience to governing authorities when those authorities require or command things that are contrary to the word or ways of God. That in itself is a topic for another time—but I mention it because Peter himself was one of the primary participants and the chief spokesman in the church's first experience of civil disobedience. When the Sanhedrin, the ruling council of the Jewish people, told the apostles that they were forbidden to preach anymore in the name of Jesus, Peter told them, "*Whether it is right in the sight of God to listen to you rather than to God, you must judge, for we cannot stop speaking about what we have seen and heard.*" (Acts 4:19-20)

So if Peter himself disobeyed the governing authorities when they commanded him to go against his Lord (who said that all authority in heaven and on earth belonged to him alone!), his urgent exhortation to the church cannot mean that he thinks that the secular rulers are to be obeyed without question. Nor can it mean that it is disrespectful to question them publicly or to challenge their decisions or to encourage others to confront or even resist the authorities when those authorities act illegally, unethically, or inappropriately (since that is exactly what Peter did). If that was true for the church living under what amounts to a dictatorship, how much more true is it for us, living under a democratic government that depends upon our participation in the governing process. Because

we are submitted to a higher authority, that of Jesus, it is our responsibility as his church to let the rulers of this world see what that looks like by our life and words.

If the church is not the prophetic voice that calls those who govern to accountability before God, who will do so? If the church is silent when those in power use their power to do harm, or to oppress the weak, what right do we have to claim to speak for God? If the church does not speak the truth in a time when politicians and presidents repeat damnable lie after damnable lie, of what possible use are our pulpits? (Proverbs 29:12– “*If a ruler listens to falsehood, all of his officials will be wicked.*”)

So Peter’s command to submit to human authorities does not mean that we are to obey without question every edict that comes from the White House or the Kansas Capital building or the mayor’s office. Nor does it mean that I can never challenge the conduct or policies of someone in public government. What it does mean is that I must make sure that what I am doing is good—that it reflects the goodness of God. When people see what I am doing, they need to see that it conforms to the will of God and shows the truth and goodness of the gospel, not just my preferences or opinions or complaints about some decision. Because what is at stake is not a cause, not an issue; what is at stake is the message of Jesus Christ, the gospel that God has sent for the salvation of the nations. What is at stake is not a single human government in one place or time, but the governance of the human race under the lordship of Jesus Christ.

So if we are taking a stance of civil disobedience or protesting or challenging the positions, policies, or behavior of someone in government, *how we carry that out matters more than the particular issue in question*, even a question of great importance, such as the one that is currently inflaming our nation.

[Slide 13] *Honoring all people*

When Peter’s first readers heard him say that they should honor the authorities and submit to them, they would not have been shocked or surprised. Most people living in the Greco-Roman world of that time would have assumed that showing honor to rulers was normal. His exhortation would have sounded conventional, something that most anyone would say—even though his reasons for saying they should submit would have been very different. But the second example he gives them definitely would have shocked them. Peter says, “*Honor everyone.*” That is definitely not conventional thinking at the time—or any other time in human history.

The Greco-Roman world had very clear and distinct divisions of society, each with its own levels of marked-out statuses. Whether you were regarded as

honorable or dishonorable depended on a number of factors (wealth, family, occupation, gender, ethnicity, nationality, relationship to Caesar, religion, and so on). Honor was a commodity—and there was a limited amount available. If I am to show you honor, that means my honor is diminished somewhat; my status declines in relation to your status which is improved. Only among true friends, who were genuinely peers from the same class could there be something resembling equality. To offer honor to someone who was less honorable than yourself would be a threat to your social status. Why would any intelligent person consider such a thing? And the notion that everyone was worthy of being honored was something that would have been thought odd, confusing, even laughable.

[Slide 14]

Yet Peter insists—“*Honor everyone.*” In particular, he is insisting that Christians regard with honor those who are disregarded by others, those who are thought to be dishonorable, someone to be avoided (lest you be contaminated by their shamefulness): *those who have failed*—sinners, adulterers, thieves, addicts; *those who are weak*—children, women, the aged, the sick, the poor; *those who are marginalized*—slaves, immigrants, uneducated, those with special needs or developmental deficiencies; *those who are outcasts*—demonized, lepers, criminals.

[Slide 15]

“*Honor everyone.*” Because you know that you were just an uncut stone, a rough rock taken from a river bed or a quarry pit and placed upon Christ, fitted and shaped so that God could shine through you—show honor to those who are still in the process of being brought to the foundation, who are still outside the fold, who may even still be enemies of the gospel. For the same grace that transformed you can transform them.

When you show honor to someone, giving them respect, treating them with dignity, you are acknowledging that this is a person. This is someone created in the image of Almighty God, someone whom God passionately loves, someone for whom Jesus died—and someone who could be your brother or sister, if they would repent and turn to Jesus. They might even become a close friend. (I have a friend in Norway who says, “*Some of the best pastors aren’t even saved yet.*”) But whether or not that person becomes a believer, when you treat them with honor, you let the goodness of God show through you. You allow the gospel to be seen. You put God’s truth and power and love on display. Your little piece of the cathedral that is the dwelling place of the Spirit of God gets to shine for a moment. And that might be all that it takes for someone—maybe someone who is just

observing you from afar—to recognize that God is in this place, that Jesus is their only way to know God, and to give their life to him.

[Slide 16] *Live as free people who are slaves*

There's another thing that Peter says in this short passage that would have confused his readers at first. We'll spend more time on it in the next sermon, but it's part and parcel of this whole idea of being people of honor, people who are characterized by living for the honor of God, who show that by honoring others rather than seeking to be honored before others.

Peter tells his readers to live as free people. That is, they were to think of themselves as people who had been freed from the slavery of sin. But that freedom was not an excuse for them to disregard moral codes of conduct. Freedom wasn't the same thing as license to do evil without consequences. "Freedom" didn't mean, "Do whatever you want, God doesn't care." It didn't mean that there weren't any requirements upon you other than those you chose for yourself. Freedom wasn't the same thing as being lawless, a rebel.

Then Peter said the confusing thing. "*Live as free people . . . who are slaves—of God.*" Your freedom, he says, is not the freedom from rules, or the freedom from obligations, or the freedom from being under authorities other than yourself. Living as free people meant choosing to be enslaved . . . to God. Instead of being compelled against my will to do good, I freely choose to do good, because I have surrendered my life to Jesus Christ and submit to him.

[Slide 17]

Think about it. Which picture better reflects the goodness and love of God? A sullen teenager who never does her chores without being forced to, and then only while swearing under her breath and making silent vows that she will never force her kids to do anything they don't want to do? Or the teenager who refuses the temptation to gripe and whine, ignores the voices of her friends in her head (and their texts on her phone) that her parents are so unfair, who does her chores willingly, without complaint (maybe even with a smile and a pleasant attitude)?

Which picture better reflects the truth and power of the gospel and the hope of salvation? A grouchy old man who tells his grandsons that he refuses to wear his seat belt or pay for insurance coverage for his car because "*the blank-blank gummint got no right to tell me what to do*"? Or the grandpa who reminds his grandsons that he may not like the restrictions of using a seat belt or paying for insurance at his age, but for the sake of others, as well as for his own safety, he obeys these laws—and they will, too, when riding with him, or when he gives them driving lessons?

[Slide 18]

Live as free people who are slaves of God. Not slaves to the changing whims of culture. Not slaves to your own desires or slaves to causes and issues. Not slaves to someone else's agenda. But live as slaves of God, people who have one master, to whom we have given our total allegiance, because he has bought us through the cross. Live as slaves who embody the kingdom of God, who are ruled by Jesus Christ, not by public opinion. Let your life demonstrate the goodness of God, the truth of the gospel, the hope we have in Christ.

Momentary outrage will neither solve the problems we face today, nor provide adequate fuel for building a better world. But a changed heart, a transformed life that is set upon honoring God and honoring others will do both.

[Slide 19]

Transition to communion

[Worship team, if you would begin making your way to the platform . . .]

We are about to take communion, the reminder of the price that was paid for us to become part of the people of God. If you have a piece of bread and some grape juice, or something that can stand in for them, go ahead and get them now, and set them aside for a moment.

We all need to be changed. Communion reminds us why that is possible, and how it is possible. It is possible because Jesus died to free us from our sins, and was raised from the dead to empower us to live differently. And living differently starts with dying to our own self, taking up the cross, and following Jesus. That's what being born again is all about.

So as we prepare to receive communion, let me encourage you that this would be an excellent opportunity for you to make or reaffirm your commitment to Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior.

For those of you who might be making your commitment for the first time, the promise of God is this: if you sincerely repent of your sins and invite Jesus to be your Lord; if you confess that he is the Son of God who died in your place, to pay the price for your sins, then he will come in to your heart and live in you through his Spirit. You'll be born again. You'll have a new hope, a living hope. So use this time to offer your heart to God. After we've sung this hymn, we'll take the elements together.

[END]