

Our Calling as God's People

1 Peter 2:4-12

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One of the biggest challenges that Christians have wrestled with over the centuries is how to live faithfully as Christians in a non-Christian world. And as much as we might want there to be, there's no one-size-fits-all answer to that. Because the answer will be different in different times, places and cultures. Every generation of Christians in every place and every culture is faced with the task of discerning what living faithfully looks like in their specific circumstances.

And I think we'd be hard-pressed to find anywhere in the New Testament that tackles this question so directly and deeply than this letter written by Peter. The letter is written to dispersed and ethnically diverse groups of Gentile Christians living in and around the region that is now Turkey. And before they became Christians, many of these people would have felt quite at home in their society, slotting easily into the expectations and norms of their culture. But when they became Christians, all of a sudden there were certain aspects of the surrounding culture which were incompatible with their new faith and with their new identity.

And so, becoming Christians meant distancing themselves from certain practices and just generally engaging differently with the world around them. And that created friction, and put distance between them and their communities who saw this new 'them' as a bit anti-social. Perhaps even a bit disruptive. And they were putting pressure on them to return to a more acceptable way of life. Now, we don't live in the kind of honour-shame culture that Peter is speaking into, and rejection doesn't have anywhere near the same consequences for us as it did for them.

So, what does this passage have to say to us?

An awful lot, I would argue. Because there are important lessons in this letter for any and every group of Christians living in a non-Christian environment. In every culture, there are expectations and accepted norms - some of which are compatible with our faith, and some of which are not.

Thousands of young people will be heading off to university in a few weeks, and their first experience will be Freshers' Week, where they will be met with all sorts of assumptions and expectations. And deciding what to enter into and what to opt out of or even push against requires wisdom, discernment and courage. And of course, it's not just university. There are lots of ways that this manifests in whatever circumstances we find ourselves in.

But the task, the question, is always the same. What does it mean to live faithfully as a Christian in this moment, in this conversation, in this decision, and more broadly, in the culture that we find ourselves in?

Towards the end of our passage, Peter urges his readers:

1 Peter 2:11

¹¹...to abstain from sinful desires, which wage war against your soul.

And I think what he's getting at here are the specific temptations that Christians in these circumstances might be facing. On the one hand, they might be tempted to give in to social pressure and just blend in with the world around them, or maybe even give up on their faith entirely. On the other hand, they may be tempted to withdraw into an insular group and cut themselves off from the rest of the world. And it might feel like a choice between one or the other.

But I think that Peter's response to that, is to say that those are not the only options. There is a space in between, a tension, that followers of Jesus are called to inhabit.

His response involves both encouragement and challenge. His encouragement centres around the security and the honour of their identity as children of God. His challenge focuses on the role and responsibilities that come with that identity.

Peter's Encouragement

So firstly, his encouragement. Peter recognises that, for the people he's writing to, becoming Christians has come at a cost. Whereas they may have been previously held in quite high regard, they're now facing rejection and shame. And in response to that, Peter reassures them that they are not alone.

In the last couple of weeks, Emma and Tom have explored what Peter says about what it means to be born into a new identity as children of God.

And in this next part of the letter, we learn that rebirth into a new identity is also rebirth into a new family. One which is not about shared genetics, heritage, or culture, but about a shared faith in Jesus Christ.

And to a people who might have been tempted to think that rejection at the hands of human beings meant rejection by God, Peter says that precisely the opposite is true.

1 Peter 2:4-5

⁴ As you come to him, the living Stone – rejected by humans but chosen by God and precious to him – ⁵you also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house...

The identity of this new group centres around someone who experienced the ultimate rejection and shame at the hands of human beings, but who God placed in the position of highest honour - the chosen and precious cornerstone. Rejected by humans, chosen and precious to God. Chosen people, royal priesthood, holy nation, God's special possession.

These are familiar terms in the Old Testament. but they are used exclusively with reference to the Israelites. But remember, Peter here is talking mainly to Gentiles - and this is huge. Peter is telling these Christians who have been rejected, shamed and ostracised that by putting their faith in Jesus, not only are they being formed into a new family - they are being formed into the family of God himself. And therefore, everything that is true for the people of Israel, their status as God's chosen people and all the promises God made to them, now apply to these Christians too. They are not just being accommodated in this new family, they have been reborn into it on equal terms.

What greater honour could there possibly be?

But notice also what Peter isn't saying. He isn't saying that they won't suffer rejection or shame. But neither is he glorifying their suffering. Rather, he seems to simply be making the point that Jesus lived a perfect life, and yet he suffered rejection and shame and misunderstanding. And if Christians are those whose identity comes from him and whose lives are modelled on his, then it shouldn't come as a surprise that they too will face misunderstanding and rejection.

But Peter reminds them that they face it together as a family and in the knowledge that those who trust in him will never be put to shame. **The verdict that really matters is God's, and in his eyes you are a chosen and precious people.**

Peter's Challenge

So, Peter offers encouragement and reassurance, but he also challenges them to resist the temptation they might be feeling to either succumb to the pressure and blend in with the world around them, or to withdraw and cut themselves off.

So firstly, Peter reminds them that as God's people, they are supposed to be identifiably different.

Two key phrases that he uses are 'spiritual house' and 'holy priesthood'. And in both, the key characteristic is holiness. Tom touched on this idea last week. Holiness is a tricky concept to grasp, but it's an important one. To say that God is holy is to recognise that he is transcendent, that he is creator and everything else is created, that he is unlimited and powerful and perfect in every way, and that all that is good comes from him. And God's holiness is awe-inspiring and terrifying because it is so intensely good and pure that nothing impure or imperfect can withstand his presence.

Now when the people heard the word 'spiritual house' they would have thought of the Temple - the place of God's presence with his people, and a kind of touchpoint between heaven and earth. In order for it to be that meeting place for God and his people, the Temple and its priests needed to be a place and a people who reflected the holiness of God. Being consecrated to him, set apart, and dedicated entirely to his worship and service. And that's why God gives all these instructions about the temple and its priests, about ritual purity and sacrifice, a whole system that would make it possible for the people of God to draw near to him.

But before this kind of Temple priesthood took shape, there was God's desire for Israel to be a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. In other words, a desire for his people as a whole - not a select few - to be his royal priesthood, whose lives were set apart for him and dedicated to worshipping and serving him.

And here we have Peter telling these Christians that they:

1 Peter 2:5

⁵ ...are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood...

The place of God's dwelling with his people is no longer a physical space. but a people.

But if nothing unclean, impure or imperfect can withstand the presence of God, then how can God dwell among deeply flawed and imperfect people?

And the answer, of course, rests on the person who is both the cornerstone of the temple and the great high priest of the priesthood, Jesus Christ. **All that we are and all that we do rests on all that Jesus is and all that he has done.** By him we are made clean, made ready for the presence of God.

So, first and foremost, **holiness is a gift. It's something that only God can impart through Jesus and the pouring out of the Holy Spirit into the lives of his people.** But because he does impart it, it can also be something that he asks of us.

**Leviticus 19:2
(1 Peter 1:16)**

⁵ "Be holy because I, the Lord your God, am holy.

Effectively, "I have made a way, now walk in it." And in Jesus, we find the perfect example of such a life lived consecrated to God.

So faced with the temptation to succumb to social pressure and return to a way of life that is indistinguishable from the world, Peter says:

1 Peter 2:9

⁹ out of darkness into his wonderful light.

Now if we stop there, I think we might be forgiven for thinking that Peter is maybe endorsing the idea of withdrawing and cutting off from the rest of the world.

But then he says this:

1 Peter 2:12

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.

So, we are called to be set apart, but we are not called to be separate. This is not about hiding away from the world out of fear and anxiety, or withdrawing with a sense of self-righteousness that makes us think we can judge the world from a distance. **Our lives are to be set apart, holy and consecrated to God, but they are to be visible lives, lived out in the world in all the arenas of society and normal daily life.** It can be all too easy for Christians then and now to detach the privilege of our identity as children of God from our purpose as children of God, from the role and responsibilities that come with that identity.

We've just finished a sermon series on the theme of Being a Blessing. From the very beginning, the story of God's people has been one of being blessed in order to bless. In order to be a blessing now!

Before i move on, I just want to acknowledge that verse 8 raises some big and difficult questions for which there are no easy answers.

**1 Peter 2:8
(Isaiah 8:14)**

⁸ A stone that causes people to stumble and a rock that makes them fall.

At first glance, it seems to suggest that there are people on the inside for whom Jesus is the cornerstone, and there are those on the outside for whom Jesus is the stumbling block, and that's that. But in the context of the rest of the passage, I just want to share a couple of thoughts.

Firstly, I really struggle with the idea of Jesus being a stumbling block that causes people to fall. But I wonder whether part of what Peter's getting at here is that when we encounter Jesus, whatever our response to him, we don't get to put him to one side and pretend he's not there. If you go for a walk and there's a boulder in the middle of the path, if you ignore it or carry on as if it's not there, you're going to walk into it. **Ignoring or rejecting Jesus doesn't mean he goes away. An encounter with him involves a response to him one way or another.**

Secondly, notice what Peter goes on to say in verse 10:

1 Peter 2:10

¹⁰ Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.

So, as well as reassurance there's also a challenge in there that says you are only God's people by virtue of God's grace and mercy - not by any virtue of your own. And it's not for us to decide who's in and who's out. And Peter expresses in verse 12 his hope that by witnessing their good deeds more people the very same people who are being hostile towards these Christians will glorify God and be welcomed into his family.

That probably leaves a lot of questions unanswered and some more raised, but it's a challenging verse that I didn't want to skip over.

Back to verse 12. There has always been a temptation for Christians to draw boundary lines between church and the world, good and bad, sacred and secular, us and them. But the vision that Peter presents here is much more nuanced. God's presence and activity in the world isn't restricted to the church. The world is his and everything in it. And we don't have a monopoly on all that is good. The fact that Peter urges them to 'live such good lives that they may see your good deeds and glorify God' suggests an overlap in values. Christians are not the only ones capable of recognising and doing good. My neighbour is not a Christian, but she is one of the most warm, caring, and loving people. And I have an awful lot to learn from her about what it means to be a good neighbour.

So, we're called to be distinct, but that's not about withdrawing to our side of a fence that we've constructed. It's about living faithfully in the world in whatever circumstances we find ourselves in. And there's no one-size-fits-all. It's about discerning in every situation what does living as a child of God, as a people of God, look like in this moment. About looking at the surrounding culture and discerning what to embrace and what to reject. And thinking about how we can make a difference by being different.

And for that, **we are always and totally reliant on the word of God and the power of the Holy Spirit at work in us.** And when we live faithfully in that way, reflecting the holiness of God, those around us develop a sense of who we are as individuals and as a people.

I don't know about you, but if I go on holiday abroad, I always feel very aware of my Britishness. And maybe that's partly because I also feel very aware of the incredibly bad reputation that we've gained for ourselves over the years. The blistering sunburn, the loud, obnoxious voices, the complete inability to pronounce anything in the local language. So, I find myself wanting to be a good guest, engaging with and being respectful of the local culture, and hoping that perhaps in some very small way that will help to undo some of the damage caused by generations of British tourists asking if they can have chips instead.

Of course, **being a good guest doesn't mean pretending to be someone we're not, or adopting the culture around us, but it does mean being respectful, being willing to learn, and being conscious of the fact that we behaviour says something about the people we represent.**

So, I suppose the challenge is, what is our reputation? What are we known for? Are we known for loving our enemies, for our generosity, for our ability to live in unity and harmony despite our differences? Or are we known for being judgmental or self-righteous or hypocritical? This is not about trying to make ourselves popular. There will be times when we can't go with the flow and that will make us deeply unpopular. But we must also recognise that there have been plenty of times when the church has suffered a blow to its reputation - not because we've gone against the grain or been misunderstood, but because we've got things badly wrong and we need to own that and repent for it. And for the reputational damage we've done, as a result, gives the world around us a false sense of what God is like.

So, Peter here is calling the church to be good representatives, to live in a way that signposts others to Jesus. There's nothing aggressive, defensive, manipulative, or fearful about this. It's simply about living out our Christian identity in a world of difference, in a way that is faithful, gentle, and respectful.

So, to Christians in every age, place, and culture, Peter's letter teaches us that living in a non-Christian environment doesn't mean slotting in with the surrounding culture, but neither does it mean detaching from it. It means being set apart, but not separate. And that's a tough task, because it's a kind of in-between space that requires us to live in tension, resisting the pull towards either blending in or withdrawing.

And we should expect it to be uncomfortable, even costly at times. But it is the space that followers of Jesus are called to inhabit, and to do so with faithfulness, integrity, gentleness and respect. And the only way we can do that is by the presence and power of the Holy Spirit in and among us, by keeping our eyes fixed on Jesus, the perfect model for what a life lived in this tension looks like. And by constantly asking God for the wisdom, discernment and courage, we need to live faithfully in whatever circumstances we find ourselves in.



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