

## **First Peter: Ethics for Exiles – Part I**

**1 Peter 2:11-17**

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Our text in this lecture is 1 Peter 2:11-17 text. Here we see that being citizens, whose hope is fixed on the coming glory, does NOT mean earthly retreat. In fact, it requires a certain form of life. An engagement with the world and its institutions. Now it's a chastened engagement to be sure, but a real engagement, nonetheless. So, this text reminds us of the first principles, the basic settings of Christian existence, as exiles in a hostile world, which, nevertheless, we are destined to inherit. So, we will make two points. Good Lives in vv. 11-12, and Free People in vv. 13-17.

### **I. Good Lives**

First, then, good lives. We are urged, notice in v.11, as sojourners and exiles. This is the third time Peter has used this a form of this designation. The basic idea is those who are away from their homeland (diaspora), living as temporary residents where they are, and journeying toward their true homeland. Abraham dwelt as a stranger (in tents) "in the promised land, as in a foreign land," Hebrews 11 tells us.

So, we too, who will inherit the earth, dwell in the land of promise, as in foreign land. Of course, our situation is much better than Abraham's. By faith, we are already lifted up to our heavenly destination. We already have the down payment, the pledge of our inheritance, in the gift of the Spirit. But the full inheritance, as we have seen, is reserved for us in heaven. All ethics, then, is ethics in, and shaped by this tension. All ethics are exile ethics. Ethics for the overlap of the ages (new age has arrived, old has not yet vanished). I urge you, as foreigners and exiles, to abstain from the passions of the flesh which wage war against your soul. Pilgrims, with their eyes fixed on Jesus, are not to be seduced by, or conformed to, the world in its fallen state, the world bent against God. We are to abstain – the word speaks of a complete cutting off – from disordered, sinful desires, from what Augustine called disordered loves.

It must be said then: that there is something about Christian ethics which is profoundly negative. I don't mean BAD. I mean a sharp negation. A "No" to the evil which has its roots deep in us. The ten commandments reflect this with their basic: thou shalt NOT. 8 out of 10 commandments have that negative framing. Thou shalt not. In the Christian vision of the moral life, sojourners first say NO. They abstain. And they do so by the free grace of God. This is fearing God during the time of your exile. These lusts, Peter continues, these wage WAR against your soul. All of us, are in an internal war with eternal consequences. Life is warfare. The Christian moral life is a raging war. This is

where all ethics starts. This is the bedrock; this interior terrain of the soul, is the first and primary battleground.

Before Peter moves out to society and the world, he moves down and in, into the interior recesses of the human person, where deep, unseen, consequential issues are being wrought and worked out.

Prov. 4: Guard your heart with all diligence, for out of it flow the issues of life.

Verse 12 continues: Live such good lives among the pagans

Now, the word for good here, is actually not the normal word used for moral goodness. It often means beautiful or attractive. (ESV: keep your conduct honorable) There is to be a kind of visible beauty to our ethical lives. That we, who profess the gospel of free grace, the gospel of abundant mercy, can easily become among the most self-righteous and unctuous people on the planet. Jesus is acutely aware of this in the Sermon on the Mount. It is precisely the activities of devotion that become the very breeding ground for hypocrisy and moral ugliness. Peter then, is looking for an obedience which produces a fragrance, a radiance, a beauty. And it is only by the gospel, which is able to both transform you, and keep you humble, to both break you and heal you, to both slay and make alive, that this can happen.

We live this way among the Gentiles, that, Peter says, though they speak against you as evildoers. Now notice – Peter does not expect your honorable conduct to be celebrated. No, he expects accusations of wrongdoing. He expects vilification. He expects mocking. Being slandered just goes with the territory. Tacitus, first century Roman historian, said Christians were “loathed for their vices.” Nero, who blamed the burning of Rome on Christians, also said Christians were loathed for their vices. He and others, like the historian Suetonius, called the faith a pernicious superstition, and accused Christians of hatred for the human race.

They were called atheists and subversives, because they wouldn't worship the gods. Cannibals, because of their claiming to eat and drink the body and blood of Christ. They were guilty of incest since they called one another brother and sister. False, twisted, charges have been there from the beginning. But beauty is not snuffed out, it does its silent, enticing work.

We live this way so that, **THOUGH** they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds. Good lives produce good deeds. Among those who vilify, some will see. They will glorify God, on what Peter calls, the day of visitation. As Jesus himself said: let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven.

The word for “visitation,” in the day of visitation, is the word we get episcopal from. It's the word for what bishops or elders do – it means to visit and inspect, to evaluate. By the “day of visitation,” where God is the bishop doing the inspecting, Peter means the day of judgment. Though of course, God visits now by his Word and Spirit. Thus, when Peter speaks of “**THE** day of visitation” he is looking toward the last day – just as he has throughout the letter. After all, he has told us to **FIX** their hope completely on the grace that ours be theirs when Christ is revealed.

Let us seek to live luminous, good, beautiful lives that summon the world to doxology, to glorifying God. This is the beauty of holiness, reflecting in the earth the beauty of the One who said: You shall be holy; for I am holy. Or to transpose that into the key of this text: You shall be beautiful, for I am beautiful.

## II. Free People

Our second point is free people. We will make three subpoints here: Subjection in verses 13 and 14, silence in verse 15, and servants in verses 16 and 17.

### Subjection

First, then, subjection. Be subject, the text begins, for the Lord's sake, to every human institution. Submission. It can ring a bit too passive in the ears of modern Western people, who are used to robust criticism of their leaders. It seems too compliant. It's likely to concede too much to an idolatrous, over-reaching, abusive state. But Peter does not think this submission is a form of weakness.

Now, Scripture makes it clear in other places that this subjection is never absolute. If the state commands what God forbids – bow down and worship this statue – then Daniel's friends disobey. If the state forbids what God commands – do not preach in this name any longer – then the apostles disobey and declare: that they must obey God rather than men.

Subjection is never absolute. And this subjection is a voluntary act. It is done by free people, not slaves. It is done by people whose dignity, whose privileged status in Christ, is secure. And precisely because that is so, they WILLINGLY place themselves under – which is what *be subject* means. And we are to be subject, not for the State's sake, not for Caesar's sake, but for the Lord's sake. The duty here is a duty of piety, a thing done unto the Lord, or, as Paul puts it in Romans 13 – for the sake of our conscience before God.

But notice the next phrase: Be subject, for the Lord's sake, to every human institution. Except the word translated institution is creature – so this is literally – be subject to every human creature. There is probably a reminder here, meant to chasten the Empire. The state is not divine. Even if instituted by God, it is a human creature, a fully human institution.

So, we subject ourselves, to every human creature, whether it be to the emperor as supreme – again, the emperor as supreme, is but a human creature – Jesus, and not Caesar, is Lord. But, whether it's the emperor, or a delegated authority, we subject ourselves to them for the Lord's sake.

### Silence

That's subjection. Our second subpoint is silence. We submit because, v.15 says: this is the will of God, that by doing good, you should put to silence the ignorance of foolish

people. Our civil obedience will act like a muzzle – it will silence the ignorance of fools – either now, or in the day of God’s visitation.

Here, subjection, civil obedience, has the subversive character of changing the perception that the state (and the culture more broadly) has of Christians. How much of a threat to the common good, and the order of society can they be, if they so freely and willingly obey the authorities?

## **Servants**

This brings us to the third subpoint, servants. And here we have something that can seem a bit jarring, or at least something of a paradox. Live as people who are free. Nothing Peter has said, nor anything he will say, is contrary to true human freedom. Not the subjection of servant to master, not the subjection of wives to husbands, not the subjection of the church to elders, not the subjection of all to civil authorities, nor the mutual subjection of one to another, none of this is contrary to human freedom. Quite the opposite in fact. These are the actions of legitimately, deeply free people. Freedom itself is deeply distorted, debased and degraded in our culture. Freedom, and this should be news to no one....Freedom is NOT the ability to do what you want, or to follow your heart, or to “do you.”

Our debased freedom creates slaves, not free people. And shallow self-expression (sexual or otherwise), is often a sign of the deepest bondage. Our broken selves need to be healed in the new self, that we put on in Jesus Christ, the self which restores the beauty of the image of God, which we have defiled. Freedom is deliverance from the curse of the law, and our own self-righteousness. Freedom, then, is liberation from sin and death, and the powers which control and destroy us. In short, it is the TRUTH of the gospel which sets us free.

Jesus will suffer the shame of the cross, to liberate us from the tawdry pseudo-freedom of self-expression. Paul speaks of this genuine freedom when he says in Galatians: It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the flesh; rather, serve one another humbly in love. Freedom from sin. Freedom for loving service. Freedom from self. Freedom for the other. Deep. Interior. Liberation.

Peter uses the same language as Paul. Live as people who are free, not using your freedom as a cover-up for evil, but living as servants of God. But free people live, the text says, as servants of God. Here is the radical edge of the gospel. Servants here means slaves. Free people are slaves. It would have sounded absurd in the Greco-Roman world to talk like this. Free people are slaves to God. Or as Paul puts it in Romans 6, summarizing much of what I’ve been after here:

“When you were slaves to sin, you were free from the control of righteousness. 21 What benefit did you reap at that time from the things you are now ashamed of? Those things result in death! 22 But now that you have been set free from sin and have become slaves of God, the benefit you reap leads to holiness, and the result is eternal life.”

One is either a slave of sin or a slave of righteousness. But slaves/servants we will be. So, free people are servants of God. And here, Peter means servants of God IN subjection to others. This has not been put better than Luther did, in his pithy and famous saying on the topic of Christian freedom.

A Christian is a perfectly free lord of all, subject to none. A Christian is a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to all.

Finally, in v.17, Peter summarizes what this kind of life looks like in four short commands. They are a fitting application for what we have seen in this text. And we will conclude with them. Let's take them in order.

### **Honor Everyone**

First, Honor everyone. Honor here means respect. Respect all. Treat everyone with dignity as a bearer of the image of God. Sounds simple enough. But who actually does it? (our civil authorities, other party?) We are constantly calculating who deserves honor, who is worthy, and who doesn't. Who can be written off and condemned as beneath us, or who is beyond the pale.

If anything, the gospel would teach that the ones we think are less deserving of honor, should receive even more honor. We should go out of our way to honor our enemies, our political foes, our oppressors, the people who rub us the wrong way... You know? Those evil people who deserve nothing but our contempt. Like the ignorant and foolish who are harassing and slandering the church to which Peter is writing. Even them. Honor. Every. Last. Human being.

### **Love the Brotherhood**

Second, love the brotherhood. Here there is a community, a new family of brotherly love, where more than honor is commanded. We have already seen Peter say: we have been purified by the gospel to fervently love one another from the heart. Free people love the church. Warts and all. They don't flee the church because its full of broken people, hypocrites, and the like. They see in the church a divine summons. One they are not FREE to escape, but truly FREE to engage. Love the brotherhood of the church. It is the labor of free people.

### **Fear God**

Third, fear God. Beyond honoring all, and loving the church, God is to be feared. Held in awe. Reverenced. Trembled before. Worshipped. This fear does not create groveling slaves. It is clean and enduring and liberating. It creates free people.

### **Honor the Emperor**

Fourth, and last. Honor the emperor. The Emperor does not get the love shown to the church, and most definitely does not get the worship and fear shown to God. They get the respect, the honor due to all. The Jews offered sacrifices in the temple for the well-

being of the emperor. And Christians offer up spiritual sacrifices, prayers and petitions, for all in authority.

This then is the shape of ethics for exiles. This is the good life. The honorable and beautiful life. This is what free people do. And this is what you are. Live as free people, not using your freedom as a cover for evil, but as servants, slaves of God. Amen.

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