

Ps 100:1,2
Hy 21:4,5
Ps 83:1,6,7
Ps 35:5,6,7
Ps 69:4,5; Hy 12:1
1 Peter 2:4-25
Matthew 5:38-48
1 Peter 2:11

Yarrow, December 6, 2009

Beloved Congregation of the Lord Jesus Christ!

The apostle Peter wrote a letter to particular Christians living nearly 2000 years ago on the subject of how they were to live as Christians in a fallen and unbelieving world. We're interested in what he writes because we search too for how we are to live in a fallen and unbelieving society, be it modern.

The apostle has laid the foundation for his instruction in the first section of his letter, known to us as 1:3-2:10. Beginning at 2:11 Peter moves on to describe this manner of living in detail – and right away sets forth his thesis sentence on the subject. It's our text: "I urge you, as aliens and strangers in the world, to abstain from sinful desires, which war against your soul." This abstaining, Peter adds in vs 12, needs to happen in the sight of the public, for it's they who watch you carefully. This abstaining looks like something, and so Peter gets into specifics in the rest of the chapter. That's what we need to listen to this morning.

I summarize the sermon with this theme:

HOW TO LIVE IN A FALLEN WORLD: ABSTAIN FROM SINFUL DESIRES.

1. The Incentive for abstaining,
2. The Look of abstaining,
3. The Example of abstaining.

1. The Incentive for Abstaining.

The apostle gives three reasons why he wants his readers to abstain from sinful desires. The first has to do with their identity as "aliens and strangers in the world." Those two terms catch the notion that Peter's readers are oddballs in the eyes of their townsfolk, weird people, persons the locals don't understand. They're different because they don't do the sort of things general society would do. Peter mentions an example in 4:3: the locals live in debauchery and lust, and that's a reference to satisfying the appetite of the flesh in pursuit of fulfillment from wherever you can get it whenever you want it. In the process the locals give themselves to drunkenness and as a result to orgies in the temples of their gods. The Christians of town used to do the same, but since they've come to faith in Jesus Christ they act differently, and that makes the locals think they're odd. 4:4: "they think it strange that you do not plunge with them into the same flood of dissipation, and they heap abuse on you." As a result, these Christians suffer; they're social outcasts, aliens and strangers in town, weirdoes.

Nobody likes to be a weirdo, and so the temptation is there to join in the habits that characterize your neighbours and your workmates – be one of them. To prevent his readers from going in that direction, Peter had devoted all of chapter 1 and the beginning of chap 2 to the wonderful work God was doing in these Christians, work that made them stick out as strangers in town *not* because they were less than the people of town but because they were *more*. For God, Peter had written in 1:2, had "chosen"

these Christians for Himself in Jesus Christ to be His people. As a result, they were given “new birth” – and that’s to say that they were delivered from a view of reality as small and narrow as the unborn child has in the womb. Those who are born come to realize that reality is much bigger than what they experienced in the womb, and those who are born again also come to realize that reality is much bigger than what the eye sees. For the reborn recognize that God in heaven is real, and redemption from sin and brokenness is real also, and it’s a question of time before the Saviour Jesus Christ comes again when the reborn will inherit the New Jerusalem God has prepared for His own. There is a mighty perspective, one that has concrete room for God in one’s thinking and planning. Important, then, is no longer the pursuit of the comforts of this life (as if this life is as good as it gets and so we’ve got to make the most of it); to the born again such a perspective is far too short-term and narrow! Important is the glorious news of belonging to this God, being His child! This God in Jesus Christ is building His kingdom, and you have the privilege of being part of that kingdom-building; you’re like a living stone being built into a living palace the cornerstone of which is none less than Jesus Christ Himself – what a privilege! While the townsfolk, then, are busy building their earthly empires and trying to make the most of life today (for they’re sure this is as good as it gets and the winner is the one with the most toys...), you have a much bigger and better perspective of reality; “you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God” – how exciting! So your focus is so different from the neighbour’s – and he sees it and thinks you’re funny, odd, an alien and a stranger....

So there’s the first reason why Peter’s readers are to “abstain from sinful desires”. They’re to treasure what God has done in their hearts and lives in making them eternally His through Jesus Christ, and then gladly take the daily consequences for what they are. By God’s grace they *are* different from the unborn of town, and so need to *be* different.

The second reason Peter mentions is caught in the last words of vs 11: these sinful desires “war against your soul.” Exactly how that might be and what the dangers are will come back in our second point, and so we’ll need to come back to this second reason shortly.

The third reason Peter’s readers are to “abstain from sinful desires” is caught in vs 12. Always, says Peter, his readers are *on show*. The locals of town think you’re different, odd – and so always they watch to see whether you are consistent. What they see can give them reason to fault you, yet if you fumble they will mock you the more. More importantly, your abstaining from sinful desires leads to doing good deeds in your community, and that gives the locals reason to glorify God (instead of blaspheming Him). So there’s the third reason: you’re being watched.

That brings us to our second point this morning, the nitty-gritty of what abstaining looks like. Just how do you do that in practice?

2. The Look of Abstaining

That’s the instruction: “abstain from sinful desires.” What “sinful desires” is Peter thinking of? What are the “sinful desires” that “war against your soul”?

Our thoughts go to matters of the flesh, be it sexuality, be it drinking, be it gluttony, and the like. And Scripture is plain that we are indeed to abstain from such fleshly desires. But it turns out that that’s not Peter’s point here. What it is instead?

Recall the way Peter had begun vs 11, with his description of his readers as “aliens and strangers”. It is one thing to be recognized as a foreigner in your community and accepted as such; we have such people in our community too. It is another thing to be recognized as a foreigner and ridiculed because of it. By federal law such ridicule is not allowed in Canada, and rightly so. Yet that’s exactly what happened to the strangers of Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia and Bithynia – and these strangers were the Christians to whom Peter writes this letter. I mentioned 4:4 some moments ago, where Peter

mentioned that the locals thought it strange that the Christians did not join them in their “flood of dissipation”, their drunkenness and the licentiousness that followed. The result was that the Christians suffered “grief in all kinds of trials” at the hands of their townsfolk (1:6; 4:12ff; 5:10).

One is not responsible for the wrong things other do to you; their wrong actions are their responsibility and they will one day give account to God. But we are always responsible for *how we respond* to the wrongs done to us. Well now, what is the natural reaction to being victimized by the bullies around you? Our natural reaction is to hit back, to retaliate; “eye for eye and tooth for tooth” – and hit him harder than he hit you.... That inclination is what the apostle means by “sinful desires” in our text, and he tells his readers to “abstain” from this natural reaction. Instead of hitting back at those who make life difficult for them precisely because they want to be holy and so refuse to participate in the sins of the locals, the Christians of Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia and Bithynia are “live such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong” –for you don’t do the things they think ‘normal’ people ought to do and they think that that undermines social fabric– when “they accuse you of doing wrong they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day He visits us.”

Peter’s instruction here, of course, is not new. This is what Paul wrote about to the Romans. He said, “Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse” (12:14). More, “do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everybody. If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone. Do not take revenge, my friends, but leave room for God’s wrath, for it is written: ‘It is mine to avenge; I will repay,’ says the Lord. On the contrary: ‘If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink. In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head.’” Paul concludes: “Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good” (Romans 12:17-21). And this instruction, of course, is based on what Jesus commanded, “I tell you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be sons of your Father in heaven...” (Mt 5:44). “If someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also” (Mt 5:39).

To be honest, this instruction doesn’t sit well with us. Is this really how Christians are to live in an unchristian world?? We’re sure: if that’s the way we carry ourselves, we’ll be victimized even more.... We want to get in there and defend ourselves, make others in our dog-eat-dog society to have respect for us.... But the apostle, brothers and sisters, would have us “abstain from sinful desires which war against your soul,” and then right away explains how it’s possible to rest content in this attitude. For he adds vs 13 right away: “Submit yourselves for the Lord’s sake to every authority instituted among men: whether to the king, as the supreme authority, or to governors, who are sent by [God] to punish those who do wrong, and to commend those who do right” (vss 13f). It may well be that the authorities in Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia and Bithynia were themselves participating in the persecution of these oddball Christians, or it could be too that they were turning a blind eye to persecution happening from the townsfolk. Whichever way it was, Peter tells the Christians not to take the law into their own hands –why not?– simply because the Lord God had ordained a particular mechanism through which *He* would punish wrongdoers and protect those who do good – and that mechanism was the government. That the authorities fail to do what they ought to do does not, says Peter, give Christians the right to take matters in their own hands. They torch your house (and no justice follows) does not give you permission to torch their house. They bully you (and no justice follows) does not give you the right to bully them back. Rather, says Peter, submit to the authorities, recognize that the Lord is pleased to govern society through those people, and then leave the injustices you experience to the Lord; He’ll set things straight in His time. Instead of worrying your head about the wrongs you experience, make a point of doing good to the neighbour who makes things hard for you. That he avoids you in business because you’re a Christian does not mean that you ought to avoid him in business. Rather, go help him out. That’s vs 15: “it is God’s

will that by doing good you should silence the ignorant talk of foolish men.” God has set you free from sin, so “live as free men,” as people no longer in bondage to sin – including the sinful desires of your flesh, also that desire to hit back at those who hurt you. So then: “show proper respect to everyone,” including all the people on your street and in your town – even including authorities who don’t protect you the way God calls them to. We realize: Peter is really unpacking Jesus’ instruction about turning the other cheek!

This principle of submission to authority (instead of taking matters in your own hands), Peter continues, is valid also for slaves. We read the word ‘slaves’, and our thoughts go to the slaves of North America 200 years ago and the injustices to which they were subjected. Slaves in the Roman world existed in different circumstances, with different expectations than American slaves had. Yet that difference did not make slavery an acceptable or pleasant reality.

Popular expectation was that the slave’s owner dictated the slave’s religion, and determined to which gods the slave had to make sacrifices. Those slaves who became Christians invariably desired to worship the Lord along – and that brought its own tension with the master and potential suffering for the slave. But notice that here again Peter counsels submission to your master (vs 22). More, he requires “submission ... with all respect.” Why that is? That’s because Peter recognizes that the Lord is sovereign over all, and it’s *He* who gives you this particular master-who-makes-things-hard-for-you. Again, then: take matters in your own hands when you suffer wrongly? Peter is adamant: No. Vs 19: “it is commendable if a man bears up under the pain of unjust suffering because he is conscious of God.” That is: he gives the injustice of it over to God to sort out. Suffering because you deserve it has nothing winsome in it, and that includes suffering because you have sought to take matters in your own hands and the master has come down on you heavily. Better is to suffer though you don’t deserve it. Vs 20b: “But if you suffer for doing good and you endure it, this is commendable before God.”

Let’s grant, brothers and sisters, that we understand why Peter wants Christians not to retaliate when society wrongs them. Understanding Peter’s line of thinking, though, doesn’t take away our discomfort at what he says. Calling retaliation a ‘sinful desire’ sounds so strong..., and abstaining from such a natural reaction sounds so ... weak, so chicken-like.... If that’s the *look* of how the Christian has to act in a fallen world..., we’re not sure we want it.... Listen then, beloved, to the example of abstaining that Peter describes for us in Jesus Christ. That’s our third point:

3. The Example of Abstaining

Vs 23: “When they hurled their insults at [Jesus], He did not retaliate; when He suffered, He made no threats.” Those words, we recognize, are a reference to Jesus’ abuse as He experienced it from His own people after His arrest as well as from Pontius Pilate as governor-under-Rome. The Jews rejected Jesus of Nazareth as an alien and a stranger, they didn’t want this oddball who preached righteousness and condemned the Jewish leadership for their hypocrisy. So they arrested Him, and then flogged Him, spit on Him and slapped Him and insulted Him. But He raised no hand against them though He had the power to call on 12 legions of angels (Matthew 26:53). He did not raise His voice against them either though He was the Son of God Himself. The same is true when Pilate abused Him; now too He offered no resistance, did not hurl insults, did not raise a hand in self-defence. That’s because –to say it with the words of vs 13– He submitted Himself “for the Lord’s sake to every authority instituted among men,” recognizing that these authorities were given by God to do a task in punishing wrongdoers and commending those who do right. That the authorities failed to carry out their mandate before God was not for Jesus to punish; that’s something, Jesus knew, God would look after. So, vs 23, “He entrusted Himself to Him who judges justly.”

The result? Though sinless He was crucified as an evildoer – and in so doing He “bore our sins in His body on the tree, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness” (vs 24). That’s the blessed result of His entrusting Himself to God, and so leaving vengeance to God: *you and I are reconciled to God, righteous before Him!* You see, had Jesus insisted on avenging Himself, insisted on taking matters in His own hands, retaliated against those who wronged Him, *we would have no redemption* – for He wouldn’t be killed to pay for our sins. But exactly because He entrusted Himself to God and so left the injustice of things to God, He ended up crucified – and we end up redeemed!

Well now, says Peter, your calling is –vs 21– to follow Jesus’ example. The term translated for us as ‘example’ is very graphic. It’s the picture of the Grade 1 teacher drawing letters on a paper and then making her students trace over those letters in an effort to learn to make the letter just right; precisely so, says Peter, are we to trace over Jesus’ example in how He responded to abuse. As He in His perfection abstained from sinful desires to retaliate, so we in His strength are to abstain from sinful desires to take the law in our own hands. So insistent is Peter that we trace over Christ’s example perfectly that he uses a second picture at the end of vs 21; he tells his readers that “you should follow in His steps.” Follow in His steps: that’s to say that in this matter of responding to suffering-on-account-of-being-different we set our feet where Jesus set His feet – follow in His footsteps. We’re not to take bigger steps, we’re not to walk beside Jesus, we’re not to walk in a different direction than Jesus did; we’re instead to place our feet –one step at a time– in the imprint of Jesus’ steps. How do we do that? Act as He did! He did not give in to the natural desire to retaliate, the desire to strike out and take matters in our own hands. He instead (vs 23) entrusted Himself to God – and did so publicly. Sure, it resulted in more abuse and ridicule and mocking. But His soul was saved because He cast Himself upon the sovereign God in whose hands He knew Himself safe. So God accepted Him!

And now we need to go back to the wording of our text. For the “sinful desires” Peter’s listeners need to abstain from “war against your soul,” says Peter. Indeed: taking matters in your own hands means you don’t entrust yourself to the God of providence who places you in a particular culture, with particular neighbours who think you odd and so mistreat you on account of your faith. Yet if this God places you in such an environment, will He not defend you as needed? Isn’t He mighty to do so? And willing also, given that He’s sent His Son for your sins? That Son is the Shepherd and Overseer of your soul, and so you need to follow that Shepherd, blindly as a sheep must for its own good. And the sheep know: with the Shepherd is safety, and peace.

How are Christians to live in this world? Peter made clear in chap 1 that their focus is heaven, their delight is God their Saviour. So they abstain from things the unbelieving neighbour thinks is normal human activity. And the suffering that follows does not spur the Christian to retaliate, to strike back at the wrong doer. But the Christian smothers the wrongdoer with good deeds – even as Christ on the cross did not retaliate but laid down His life for evil doers, including many Jews who demanded His crucifixion. Christ’s doing good in the face of evil resulted in the salvation of many, many of His persecutors included when they repented after Pentecost.

The same is true for the Christian today. How shall we live in a fallen world? In the face of the abuse we may experience, we’ll abstain from the sinful desire of taking justice into our own hands. Instead, we’ll entrust ourselves to Him who judges justly, confident that our Good Shepherd has set us a good example. We’ll repay evil with good, and trust that God will bless such confidence with the repentance of those around us whom God has chosen to life eternal.