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Grace Fellowship Church, Port Jervis, New York

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Peter's Greeting

1 Peter 1:1-2

Prayer: *Father, I just want to thank you and praise you for your word. I thank you and praise you for your goodness. I thank you for your gift of your Holy Spirit along with your word and we pray again this morning as we pray each time that your Holy Spirit would accompany us as we open you are your book, that you would give us the privilege and the presence of your Spirit so that we could again take this in and make it of lasting value, and I pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.*

A while back I was driving down Route 17 and I saw a billboard there, I'm sure many of you have seen the billboard and it was advertising a law firm that was clearly specializing in DWI. And it showed a police car and next to the police car is a helpless victim and in giant letters it had the phrase, "We can work it out." In other words hire us, we will get you the best deal you can get. Hire us because we know the system. We can make this as painless as possible. Well, you know the same could be said for the way many folks approach religion. God is the cosmic police

force, we all sense that we are law breakers, and religion is human beings looking for the best way to work this out. Religion is defined in the dictionary as: "belief in a god or gods." And many folks think of Christianity as that, just another religion, one that is made up of people who believe that Jesus was the son of God, that he was born of a virgin, that he died on a cross, and that he rose from the grave having conquered death. They think if I believe in all of those statements about Christ then by definition I am part of the Christian religion and by the dictionary definition, they are correct. But God does not go by dictionary definitions. And a simple belief in the Christian religion does not make you a child of God or an heir of his kingdom.

The Gallup poll says the majority of people in the United States share a religious belief in Christianity. And yet we butcher our unborn to the tune of 1 million a year, we have completely normalized the perversion of pornography, marriage is no longer a sacred bond between a man and a woman and we continually remove every trace of God from the public sphere and that in and of itself is not new or unique. What is unique to our time and culture is that most of these issues, from abortion through same sex marriage to the removal of God from our public life, have very vocal proponents pushing it literally in the name of Christianity.

Nicholas Kristof writing in the *New York Times* says this of Dr. Willie Parker, a "Christian" abortionist. Dr. Parker is black, feminist, and driven by his Christian faith to provide abortions in the south where women seeking to terminate a pregnancy have few options. "I believe that as an abortion provider I'm doing God's work," Parker writes in his new memoir, *Life's Work*. "I am protecting women's rights, the human right to decide their future for themselves, and with their lives as they see fit." Dr. Parker claims that it is his faith that drives his abortion practice. And same sex marriage now has legions of evangelical proponents like Matthew Vines who wrote the best seller: *God and the Gay Christian*. He is also spearheading The Reformation Project which is "A Bible-based, Christian grassroots organization that works to promote inclusion of LGBT people by reforming church teaching on sexual orientation and gender identity. Our vision is of a global church that fully affirms LGBT people." So within the evangelical church there are now legions of people who no longer see the LGBT life-style as a sin issue that requires compassion and prayer and commitment but rather as an alternative life-style that just needs affirmation.

In terms of God being pushed out of the public square, I want to consider this latest kerfuffle that developed when Bernie Sanders was interviewing a Christian named Russell Vought for the position

of deputy director of the Office of Management and Budget. It seems Bernie had found out that this man had written a blog post saying that Christ alone is the source of salvation and that all other religions including Islam were deficient. Now according to NPR, Sanders' questioning went like this: "Do you believe people in the Muslim religion stand condemned?" Sanders asked. "What about Jews? Do they stand condemned too?" "I am a Christian," Vought repeatedly responded. "I understand you are a Christian," Sanders said, raising his voice. The senator is Jewish and said he's not particularly religious, "But there are other people who have different religions in this country and around the world. In your judgment, do you think that people who are not Christians are going to be condemned?" "I believe that all individuals are made in the image of God and are worthy of dignity and respect regardless of their religious beliefs," Vought said, while also emphasizing the centrality of Jesus Christ in salvation. "This nominee is really not someone who this country is supposed to be about," Sanders said, announcing that he would vote against him.

NPR quoted Russell Moore. Russell Moore is the president of the Ethics & Religious Liberty Commission of the Southern Baptist Convention who called Sanders' comments "breathtakingly audacious and shockingly ignorant," and deeply troubling even if they are legal: This is not some arcane or obscure private opinion being

held by this one individual, Moore told *NPR*. "The language that Senator Sanders finds so disturbing -- 'stands condemned' is language right out of the New Testament." Moore says: "There's nothing hostile about Vought's comments. "In Christian theology, no one is righteous before God," he said. "Evangelical Christians don't believe that good people go to heaven and bad people go to hell. Christians believe that all of humanity is fallen." Not so, says *NPR*. They say according to Pew research, 66 percent of all Christians and now 52 percent of all evangelicals believe today that there are many different pathways to heaven. Commenting on Sanders' exchange, *Christianity Today* said this: "As Vought stated during his hearing, 'I'm a Christian, and I believe in a Christian set of principles based on my faith.' These distinctive beliefs -- and any claim of exclusive salvation -- are increasingly viewed as offensive or problematic. In America's pluralist landscape, even Christians are shifting away from such views. When it comes to religion, the word 'exclusive' is synonymous with bigot. Even worse, Christians who communicate the exclusivity of their faith are castigated and dismissed," wrote John C. Richards, who directs the Billy Graham Center for Evangelism at Wheaton.

So in the eyes of many today, to say that I am a conservative evangelical Christian who believes Jesus when he says in *John 14*: "*I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the*

Father except through me" is to say today the opinion of lots of folks who call themselves Christians, I am a bigot. Something just doesn't jibe here. And I'm not trying to draw a line in the sand and say who's a Christian and who is not in this. God reserves that right exclusively for Himself. When Jesus said in *Matthew 7:1*: "*Judge not, that you not be judged,*" he was referring to pronouncing final judgment on someone, not on discerning their character. And when it comes to assessing what matters with regard to faith, it's best not to look horizontally to your left or right because you're going to find nothing there's nothing there but confusion. But rather to look vertically towards God as he establishes in his word what it means to be a child of His and then to ask ourselves: Do I fit that description? In short, we desperately need to know what Christianity is and what the difference is between religion and relationship. And the apostle Peter shows us that difference. And it's found in a simple little greeting that he sends to his fellow exiles. That greeting can tell us the difference between a relationship with Jesus Christ and the false hope of religion. And Peter's not lecturing about theology, he's not developing some elaborate system of belief. He's simply identifying the believers the Holy Spirit is addressing through him. Here's what he says. This is the opening statement of *1 Peter 1*. He says: *Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ, to God's elect exiles scattered throughout the provinces of Pontus,*

Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia and Bithynia, who have been chosen according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, through the sanctifying work of the Spirit, to be obedient to Jesus Christ and sprinkled with his blood: Grace and peace be yours in abundance.

There are five key words in that paragraph and those words can define for us whether or not our relationship with Jesus Christ is real. Now the first word that may pop out at you in this paragraph is the "E" word. Peter says, *To God's elect exiles.* I can tell you that that word "elect" has caused me personally an awful lot of heartache and an awful lot of pain and trouble over the years. It is arguably one of the most disturbing words in Scripture and I for the life of me cannot understand why. The word "elect" comes from Greek word "eklektos" which literally means "selected." It means, as one commentator put it, "expressly selected by God as his special possession forever." It also means that none of us come to faith in Christ on our own. And all those who are in the faith are here because God selected us before the foundations of the earth were even established. Most of us find that a very disturbing concept, something that we are alternately delighted and horrified by. Delighted to think that we're chosen of God and horrified to think that we had nothing to do with it, that we had no say whatsoever in it, that it wasn't or doesn't appear to be fair or equitable, that it appears that everyone does not have an equal

chance at it. I mean, we are horrified that God would practice some form of what appears to be discrimination because from all appearances, God does appear to discriminate. But all of our horrors are based on a false premise. It is the premise that at some time, somewhere, somehow, someone ever deserved or could deserve to be chosen by God. We construct theologies that are designed to get God off the hook for a practice that seems to us to be patently unfair. And the more God goes out of his way to insist that election is by his choice alone, the more we go out of our way to resist that choice. God tells us in *Romans 3:10*: *As it is written: "None is righteous, no, not one; no one understands; no one seeks for God."* He also tells us in *Ephesians 2* that we're already dead in our trespasses and sins, that we were already dead when he chose us. And he goes on to say that we were by our very natures objects of God's wrath, and that because of his great love for us *even when we were dead in our trespasses, he made us alive together with Christ -- by grace you have been saved.* Dead men and women don't seek God. Dead men and women don't reach out for him, they don't recognize God, they don't recognize him for one simple reason: They are dead. We want so much to cling to our notions of a God who's not arbitrary and capricious that we insist that God's election must be based on some criteria that we can grasp, some reaching out on our part, some innate goodness, some longing after God. God absolutely insists that it is not that way.

We're horrified at God's statement in Romans 9. It's that statement where he pronounces his love and his hatred on Isaac and Rebecca's twin boys while they were still in their mother's womb. *Romans 9:11* says this, it says: *Though they were not yet born and had done nothing either good or bad -- in order that God's purpose of election might continue, not because of works but because of him who calls -- she was told, "The older will serve the younger." As it is written, "Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated."* That's a tough scripture but that statement is by God's design. You see, you don't get more innocent in terms of fallenness than babies who are still in the womb of their mother. I mean, their opportunity for good or bad deeds doesn't even exist yet. And that's precisely why God chose in utero twins as an example. God says they were not yet born and had done nothing either good or bad -- in order that God's purpose of election might continue. God is resolutely disallowing human effort to have any say whatsoever in his divine choices, and frankly we are horrified by this. I mean, truth be told, many of us would love to see this scripture stricken, blotted out, but there it is. God's stark insistence that our actions have no bearing on his sovereign choices, never have and never will.

Ephesians 1 and 2 tell us that God had a plan that he instituted before he even began creation, that he expressly selected as his own possession those who though born with a heart of stone would be

given a new heart, a heart of flesh, and that these people would exist for the express purpose of bringing honor and glory to God. Now if that sounds like we had no choice in the matter, it's because we had no choice in the matter. But you have to understand something. And you have to understand about the pool that God is drawing from. God's sovereign choices were made from a pool of humanity that uniformly hated and feared him. I mean to a man and woman, child and adult, we human beings hated the God who created us. Jesus himself said in *John 15:25*: "*They hated me without reason.*" And to those who find that hard to swallow, I simply point out that this very same God made himself vulnerable by living among us flawlessly, and we detested him for that. We howled for his execution. We demanded that his blood be on us and on our children and it wasn't just the Jews in Jerusalem, it was you and it was me. Before God changed our hearts, that was the gene pool that God made his sovereign choices from. There were no exceptions to the statement that God made in *Romans 3:10* that there is none good, no not one. All of us deserved annihilation. So always remember it was from that group that God chosen as his own forever. If you are one of God's elect, you have the high privilege of being God's own possession. You were chosen by God. You were given by the Father as a gift to the Son. And here's the amazing part. No one ever asked your permission.

In *John 17* Jesus prays for his disciples. He says this: *"I have manifested your name to the people whom you gave me out of the world. Yours they were, and you gave them to me, and they have kept your word."* This is a remarkable statement. Jesus says: *"Yours they were, and you gave them to me."* I mean we know that the disciples were autonomous individuals, we know they had their own free will because we've even see them exercise that free will sinfully on numerous occasions as we read the gospels. And yet Jesus says to his Father, you own them. We belonged to you from the beginning and you gave them to me as a gift. Kind of shrinks our understanding of how big, important and independent we really are. Now you might say, well, we're really not talking about the whole population here, we're really talking about a subset. We're talking about Jesus's disciples. That's an exception, that's not the rule. But as you continue reading in *John 17*, you see Jesus expanding the message to include not just the disciples but every believer. In *John 17:20*, he says: *"I do not ask for these only, but also for those who will believe in me through their word."* Now that's you and that's me. That's every other believer in Christ. And he goes on to say: *"That they all may be one. Father, I desire that they also, whom you have given me, may be with me where I am, to see my glory that you have given me because you loved me before the foundation of the world."* I mean you have to listen carefully to what Jesus is saying here. If you are one of God's

sheep, you are literally the possession of God given by God as a gift. You've been given by the Father as a gift to the Son for his glory. And the kicker is you had absolutely no say in that whatsoever.

Now our second word this morning sees believers as: *Elect exiles according to the foreknowledge of God the Father*. And many folks see that word "foreknowledge" as taking the sting out of election. They say, well, there you have it, I mean, God doesn't choose us on the basis of nothing, he chooses us on the basis of his foreknowledge. In other words, God who's able to see through the corridors of time itself can look down through those corridors and see people who are actually seeking after him with a pure heart and those are the people who he rewards with salvation. So they are elect but they are elect according to the foreknowledge of God the Father. I mean after all, Hebrews 11 says that God is a rewarder of all who genuinely seek him. And Matthew 7 says he who seeks finds, I mean, doesn't that give us some form of autonomy? You see, if God's foreknowledge of my conduct is the basis of God's choice, then I still have some choice in this, in that it's my choice to decide about my conduct. I mean we might think God chose me but he chose me because he foreknew that I would be choosing him. And he looked down through the corridors of time and he saw me moving in his direction and he rewarded me with salvation. But

what does God see when he looks down through the corridor of human history? He sees what he said in *Romans 3*. He says: "*There's none righteous, not even one; there is no one who understands; there is no one who seeks God.*" That's a pretty damning statement. No one seeks for God. Now for sure, many seek what they think a god of some sort can offer them, I mean, that's why on any given Sunday or Monday or Saturday mosques, temples and churches are filled every week. What God is insisting here is they are not seeking him. You see, it doesn't matter. When God looks to find men seeking after him, whether it be in the past, the present, or the future, he will not find any because he flat out tells us there is no one who seeks for God. And there's only one reason why any of you are here today. It's because God first did a work in our hearts. Now do we seek after God? Well, of course we did. I mean who didn't? Every one of you can remember when you first became a believer. Most of us who went through that process get it. Yeah, I sought after God but it's only because God sought after me first. I tell folks all the time there's only one reason why anybody comes to Christ and it's the only reason, it's the most basic reason that there is. You came to Christ because you wanted to. Doesn't get more basic than that. The question is: Why did you want to? Where did the desire to seek after Christ come from? Well, the answer is the Holy Spirit. And why is it that some people have a heart and a passion for God's spirit and others don't? Well,

again, the answer from scripture is that no one had that passion until God did a work on them. And the work he did is something we describe over and over again as clearly laid out in *Ezekiel 36:25-27*. This is what God says. He says: *I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses, and from all your idols I will cleanse you. And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules.* Now you look at that passage and you notice the pronoun "I" appears six times in that passage and each time it is speaking what God is doing and not us. God says, I will sprinkle clean water on you. I will cleanse you, I will give you a new heart, I will put my Spirit within you, I will remove the heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh, I will put my Spirit within you and cause you to be obedient to my statutes and rules. See, when God says we were chosen by the foreknowledge of God the Father, it's to his credit not ours. I mean, it's far more wonderful than saying of God who looked down through the corridors of time for a few good men and women and guess what? He found me. I mean the word "foreknow," the word "foreknow" is from the Greek word "proginosko." It means "to know intimately ahead of time." I mean it's the same "know" that is used by God to describe the intimacy of sex within marriage. I

mean, in *Genesis 4* it says: *Adam knew Eve and she bore Cain.* Matthew's gospel tells us that Joseph had no intimate relationships with Mary until after Jesus was born. It says in *Matthew 1:25*: *Joseph knew her not until she had given birth to a son. And he called his name Jesus.* Well, that same word for "to know" is used of God here in *1 Peter 1:1*. It says: *To God's elect who have been chosen according to the foreknowledge of God the Father.* And God is saying he chose to know us as intimately as a husband knows his wife and that he chose to do that at the dawn of creation before Adam even breathed. God says he selected us as his personal possession, that he knew us as intimately as we could be known ahead of time. I mean the term "foreknow" has nothing to do with God searching history for souls worthy to be granted a gift of faith. And the fact is since Adam's fall, there's not been born any soul that God could look down through time and say "good," except for the Lord Jesus Christ. And we who are the elect of God are the Father's gift to the Son who have Christ alone as the source of our goodness. As Jesus prayed to his Father in *John 17*, he says: *"I have manifested your name to the people whom you gave me out of the world. Yours they were, and you gave them to me, and they have kept your word."* You see, this doctrine of election is both glorious and humbling at the same time. It is glorious to have the privilege of being chosen by God; it is humbling to be given as a gift even if it is from God to God. And what it shows

us is that we are not the center of the universe and that God in fact is.

Peter's third word describes what the world thinks of elect individuals chosen according to the foreknowledge of God. He writes again: *Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ, to those who are elect exiles of the Dispersion in Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia, according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, in the sanctification of the Spirit, for obedience to Jesus Christ and for sprinkling with his blood: May grace and peace be multiplied to you.* You see who Peter is writing to here? He is writing to the elect exiles. Some of the other versions use "strangers," some say "temporary residents," some say "pilgrims" but here you see yet another aspect of being God's elect. See, if you are in that category, then you are by definition a stranger, a pilgrim, an exile. In short, God is telling us that the elect of God will not fit well in this world. Jesus made that crystally clear in *John 15*, he said: *"If the world hates you, know that it has hated me before it hated you. If you were of the world, the world would love you as its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you."* I have some serious doubts that Bernie Sanders has ever read *John 15*, but if he did, he would find the source of his animus directed toward the director of the Office of Management and

Budget. *"Because you are not of the world, but I choice you out of the world, therefore the world hates you."* See, the world has its drives, its passions, and its desires and they are invariably opposed to the kingdom of God. And when you embrace one kingdom, you are not going to fit the other. The world finds it strange and bizarre that we would give our lives over to an obscure carpenter who claimed to be God, that we would invest our lives in something that seems to be so anti-progress, so anti-science. These exiles just don't see this world like the world does. I'll be the very first one to admit that one of the strangest sounding things to me is that we started as some primordial protein soup and that we evolved from soup to slime, to fish, to reptiles, to birds and then finally mammals and that when we die, we just rot and that we have no God, that we need no God because we're here on our own and we answer to nobody. And I know, look, I know that sounds perfectly reasonable to an awful lot of people. But then something awful happens. Something like a shooter attempt to go assassinate congressmen at a baseball practice. And when something hideous like that happens, it seems like all the pseudo science evaporates and we have this amazing picture of Democrats and Republicans surrounding second base on their knees in prayer. Now you can be cynical and say that was nothing more than a photo op, or you can also say that when we are confronted with existential evil such as 911 or the Pulse nightclub or the London Bridge attacks or any of

the other hideous things that have confronted us, we see people inevitably retreat to prayer. I mean I always wonder where atheists and scoffers go when something hideous like that happens. You see, it is certainly true that as elect strangers, we don't fit this world. And the question is who is the one that is out of phase? Us or them? If you are God's elect you will be a stranger in this world.

And the other side is this, if no one has ever felt the least bit of discomfort with where you are as a Christian, you might wonder yourself, where do I fit in this? I mean, it is legitimate to ask yourself whether or not you are one of God's elect. Ask yourself am I chosen according to the intimate way of a God who knew me ahead of time? And the critical question is, well, how am I supposed to know that? Well, I certainly hope that you know by now that simply going to church and saying the sinner's prayer and even being baptized doesn't make you a Christian.

Well, what is it then that marks you out as a person who is one of God's elect? Well, that comes down to another important word in Peter's greeting, it's our next word, and it's the word "obedience." Peter writes in the NIV: *To God's elect, exiles scattered who have been chosen according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, through the sanctifying work of the Spirit, to be*

obedient to Jesus Christ. And what God is saying is that if you are chosen, if God chose to intimately know you ahead of time, if he has sanctified you through the Holy Spirit by doing exactly what Ezekiel 36 says. If you've been sprinkled with clean water and cleansed through the sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit, then something very specific is going to be the result. Again *Ezekiel 36: I will give you a new heart and I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules.* What God is saying is that obedience is going to be your new default drive. If you are the elect of God, you have been chosen for obedience to Jesus Christ. Now that doesn't mean that you suddenly become a robot. And what it does mean is that what God has done is that he has done a major spiritual procedure on you. He has given you a spiritual heart transplant. That old stony heart that you had, it had no desire whatsoever for obedience. But this new heart, this heart of flesh that God has installed in you, it is a vastly different heart. It is a heart tuned and pointed toward obedience. After this God-driven surgical procedure, obedience becomes a deeper pleasure in your life than whatever sin and sickness had occupied it before. I mean it's almost as if you could imagine how a physical heart transplant takes place. You wake up the next morning with something brand new, something very, very different inside you and from that moment forward you begin a new process of living. And this we call our

final word for Peter, we call it "sanctification." Again, we have been chosen according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, through the sanctifying work of the Spirit, to be obedient to Jesus Christ. Now it takes an entire lifetime and more to complete and this will to obey starts the moment you receive this brand new heart. Are you perfectly obedient right from the start? No, of course not. The difference is that now you have within you a drive to obedience that was not there before. Disobedience is not nearly as pleasurable nor as spiritually profitable as it was before. Obedience begins to become more and more attractive because your heart literally has been changed. Jesus referred to it as being born again because the change is literally that radical. The problem is the evangelical church has sold this heart transplant short for many, many years now. I mean it's basically said, it's yours for the asking and it costs you nothing. And that simply isn't true. You see, at the beginning of this message I pointed out the great difference between religion and a relationship with Jesus Christ and if your only interest is religion, then you're like that poor sap in the billboard, I mean, you only want the best deal that you can get. You want the biggest bang for the smallest buck. You're looking for a way to work out your life so that you can have Jesus Christ and his kingdom and the world and its kingdom. But you can't have them both. If you are God's elect, then God will not let you be satisfied with a little bit of both.

See, God's elect are not some group of people who are fat and sassy, having won life's greatest lottery. They are people driven by the Holy Spirit to love God and to demonstrate that love by obedience. And Jesus Christ made that clear in John 14. This is what he said in *John 14:15*, he said: *"If you love me, keep my commands."* In verse 16 he says: *"Whoever has my commands and keeps them is the one who loves me."* In verse 23 he says: *"Anyone who loves me will obey my teaching."* In verse 24 he says: *"Anyone who does not love me will not obey my teaching."* Understand, Jesus is not giving us a list of non-negotiable demands here. He's not giving us a new set of imperatives, things that you have to do now. Rather he is describing a new set of indicatives, things that indicate what a Christian's life is really like, things that are the new natural to those who are truly the elect of God. These are attitudes that describe the way born-again Christians naturally behave. And God is saying if you love me, it will be completely normal and natural for obedience to be a new default drive within you. And the reason is simple and it once again comes from Ezekiel 36: The Spirit of God imparts within a will to obedience. That's the sanctifying work of the Spirit for obedience to Jesus Christ. I mean, there's no thought of working out a deal here because there's no deal to work out when both parties are committed to the same ends and goals and that is the glory of God. They both share the same commitment because God's elect are God's own possession.

There's no place for pride in God's elect because nothing they did or could do got them there in the first place. I mean, they understand that they were fallen, hell-deserving sinners who exist as testimonies not of their own goodness but of the grace of God. And to be sure, we still sin because we're still sinners, but inside us the sanctifying work of the Spirit for obedience compels us to hate our sin and long for the power to obey God's commands. It literally becomes our new passion.

And so we have in this one little paragraph from 1 Peter 5, words that describe a born-again believer. We are: 1, elect. Expressly selected by God as his special possession forever. 2, foreknown. Chosen according to God's foreknowledge. God chose to know us intimately ahead of time. 3, exiles. Because we are chosen of God, we will never quite fit with this world's system. And if you're completely comfortable with this world, you must ask yourself why? Why am I so comfortable? 4, sanctified. We are strangers chosen by the sanctifying work of the Spirit. The minute you are saved, God began the work of sanctification in your life. Now it's going to take an entire lifetime and more to complete but it's happening right now; it is ongoing right now. And again, if you have no desire to grow in your knowledge of and passion for obedience for Christ, you need to ask yourself why. Why don't I have that? And 5, obedient. We are strangers chosen by God for

the sanctifying work of obedience. Being careful to obey God's rules is our new default drive. Not that we're perfect at it but it becomes our new passion. And if obedience isn't our passion and disobedience is, again we have to ask ourselves why.

You know, Peter covers an amazing amount of territory in that little paragraph, and the ultimate question that we have to ask ourselves this morning is really one of addresses. Is 1 Peter properly addressed to you? Have you been expressly selected by God as a special possession of his forever? Have you been intimately known by God since before creation? Have you been set apart by the Spirit of God to move you to follow his decrees and be careful to fulfill his laws? Do you have a passion for obedience? Now if you can't honestly say "yes" to those questions and if this problem truly bothers you, maybe God's Holy Spirit is appealing to you right now. Maybe he's telling you to quit this religion stuff and start the relationship that he's been patiently waiting for you for. See, the good news is that God is always ready to welcome you with open arms. And if you do know that you fit Peter's description, I've got a letter for you from the apostle Peter. This is what he says: *Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ, to God's elect exiles of the Dispersion in Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia -- subset as well as Orange County, Pike County Sussex County and anywhere else -- according to the foreknowledge*

of God the Father, in the sanctification of the Spirit, for obedience to Jesus Christ and for sprinkling with his blood: May grace and peace be multiplied to you. Let's pray.

Father, I just thank you that in the midst of a culture that is overwhelmingly confused as to what it really means today to be a Christian, that we have your letter, we have what Peter gave just as a simple greeting, as a checklist of where we belong as whether or not we are one of your elect chosen exiles, foreknown by God, sanctified for obedience. Father, give us the assurance that we're there and if we're not, Lord, I pray that anybody that's in this room that feels the pang of conscience, that feels the draw of the Holy Spirit to sit down with us, to meet with us, to get it pinned down right here, right now today. God has been patiently waiting to say chuck the religion part, embrace the relation part. I pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.