

A Sermon
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Grace Baptist Church
Bryans Road, Maryland
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Christian Integrity

1 Peter 2:11-25

At the end of last Sunday's sermon, you were on your feet, giving praise to God for his power at work within us. As today's sermon begins, I'll let you sit, though standing would certainly be a fitting posture for the tone of 1 Peter, at least in the beginning. Before we get to this morning's text in chapter two, Peter has already opened the letter with a rousing expression of worship: "Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead. . . " (1:3). And then, as if he has built up so much momentum, Peter, pausing for a quick breath, keeps on going: ". . . and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade—kept in heaven for you, who through faith are shielded by God's power until the coming of the salvation that is ready to be revealed in the last time" (vv. 4-5). And all God's people say, "Amen!"

But Peter doesn't wrap it up with an Amen. Instead, he goes on to remind God's people that the joy they have because of Christ's death and resurrection helps them keep their sufferings and trials in perspective. "These have come," says Peter, "so that your faith—of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire—may be proved genuine and may result in praise, glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed" (v. 7). Peter isn't just trying to put a positive spin on a difficult situation. He's actually reassuring his hearers that in the midst of their hardships and persecution, God is present and working, moving them toward the goal of their faith, the salvation of their souls (v. 9).

Remember that Peter is writing to encourage and exhort a religious community that was in distress. These followers of Jesus were on the margins of society, and were increasingly maligned for their faith and their way of life. They understood that there should be some degree of separation between the patterns of living they shared within their Christian communities and the patterns of living that characterized the larger society. After all, they were people who belonged to God, the God who had originally called and created Israel, and through Israel had sent a Savior to reveal and accomplish his purposes for the whole world. Now there were these communities made up of both Jews and Gentiles who had placed their faith in Jesus. So it was crucial that they not lose sight of their identity as a holy community, a distinctive people in the midst of a world that was indifferent to, and even hostile toward, God's purposes.

The early church, like the church at all times in all places, was the result of God's mercy. And now, this community of God's people was charged with embodying and exhibiting the mercy of God in the world. They had to do so in the only place they could, namely, the context of their daily lives, their political setting, and their relational networks. That's why today's text refers to circumstances, practices, and structures that sound foreign, and in some cases even abhorrent, to our understanding and sensibilities. Things like yielding to the absolute authority of a king, or being an obedient slave to your master. Though we now view these kinds of social and political institutions as contrary to the will and purposes of God, these realities were part of the on the ground circumstances in which the early Christians were called to worship, work, and witness.

As they did so, they were supposed to be guided, in part, by the example of Jesus. Peter says of our Lord, "When they hurled their insults at him, he did not retaliate; when he suffered, he made no threats. Instead, he entrusted himself to him who judges justly" (v. 23). So as the church was living out its faith in an atmosphere of hostility and resistance, its primary task wasn't to return evil for evil, to resist violence with violence, or to fight fire with fire. On the contrary, believers were to commit their lives, day by day, into the hands of a righteous God, and to focus on doing righteousness. Whenever they encounter opposition to what they preach and practice, followers of Jesus are to remember that God is both loving Father and just judge, who raised Christ from the dead, and that in Christ, they're able to do what Christ did, namely, return good for evil.

That's because the salvation that believers experience through Christ isn't just deliverance from certain things. In other words, salvation from the wrath of God and eternal condemnation. Salvation from the power of sin and captivity to the past. Salvation from the grip of decay and death. All these are critical and true. But by the grace of God, we're not only *saved from*; We're also *saved for*. Peter says, "He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness" (v. 24). So what God has done for us in Christ not only secures our forgiveness but also makes us new. It moves us from an old world into a new one. It means an exit from sins and an entrance into righteousness. The two are inseparable.

Author Patrick Morley has written: "The American gospel has evolved into a gospel of addition without subtraction. It is the belief that we can add Christ to our lives, but not subtract sin. It is a change in belief without a change in behavior. It is a spiritual experience without any cultural impact. It is revival without reformation, without repentance."¹ Morley's message is in sync with Peter's message about the shape of the Christian life. "Die to sins and live for righteousness," says Peter. Both the subtraction of sin and the addition of Christ are there. In fact, Peter is probably placing even more stress on the add Christ component. As I said, we're not just saved from evil; We're also saved to do good. The writer of Ephesians pushes the same point: "For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast. For we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do" (2:8-10).

God has forgiven us and raised us from the dead in order for us to do good in his world, and to live for righteousness, especially in a social and cultural context where many people don't hold to the same kingdom of God values or the same behavioral expectations that we share and cultivate within the life of our church. Now doing good doesn't mean that we're sent to fix everybody or to save the world. It simply means that we're sent to announce, by the totality of our lives, in word and deed, the fixing and the salvation that God has already accomplished in Christ, and to do so in the details of our daily context. That means doing good in your household, among your family. Doing good in your marriage. Doing good in your neighborhood, up and down your street. Doing good in your apartment complex. Doing good on the road, or in your carpool. Doing good in your office, your factory, or your store. Doing good in your school and your classroom. Doing good at your favorite hangout or in your support group. Doing good in our community. Doing good in the public square and the halls of government. Doing good in the church, for the world.

And doing good, not out of our own sense of righteousness, but as a witness to and display of God's righteousness. Doing good and practicing mercy, because we are recipients of mercy. Doing good outwardly because of who we are inwardly, through Christ. That's what it means to live with Christian integrity. It means that what's on the outside flows from, and matches with, what's on the inside.

In his autobiography, Warren Wiersbe tells about his first church building project as a young pastor in Indiana. He and the congregation's building committee were working with a church architect named Frank Schutt. During one of the committee meetings, Wiersbe says he learned a good lesson about architecture and theology, something he hadn't been taught at seminary. In the meeting Wiersbe asked Schutt, "Why do we need such an expensive, high ceiling in the auditorium? We're not building a cathedral. Why not just build an auditorium with a flat room and then put a church façade in the front of the building?" And in a very quiet voice, Schutt replied, "Pastor, the building you construct reflects what a church is and what a church does. You don't use façades on churches to fool people. That's for carnival sideshows. The outside and the inside must agree."²

The outside and the inside must agree. That's not just true of a church architecturally, but relationally as well. We can't project ourselves to the community as a certain type of congregation and yet be something different when we're actually gathered together in worship and fellowship. Doing good here in our community, in this part of the world where God has placed us, is inseparable from doing good toward one another in our life together as a church. We can't tend faithfully to the soul of our community if we aren't also tending faithfully to the soul of our congregation. And tending faithfully to the soul of our congregation involves you tending to your own soul as an individual. Notice that before he addresses the church's witness in the larger culture, Peter opens today's text by saying, "Dear friends, I urge you, as aliens and strangers in the world, to abstain from sinful desires, which war against your soul" (v. 11). So if we want our church to do good in the world, and to be an embodiment of holiness in a cultural atmosphere where holiness, at least the way we understand it, isn't a pressing concern, then each of us needs to be pursuing holiness in his or her own heart.

This pursuit of holiness, individually and together, is essential to having Christian integrity. Otherwise, our society starts to conclude, and sometimes rightly so, that we're more fired up about preaching righteousness than about practicing it. We end up looking more sanctified on the outside than we really are on the inside. There's a story told about the *Queen Mary*, which was the largest ship to cross the oceans when it was launched in 1936. Through four decades and a world war she served until she was retired, anchored as a floating hotel and museum. During the conversion, her three massive smokestacks were taken off to be scraped down and repainted. But on the dock they crumbled. It turns out that nothing remained of the 3/4-inch steel plate from which the stacks had been formed. All that was left were the more than 30 coats of paint that had been applied over the years. The steel had rusted away.³ What was on the outside hadn't really matched what was, or was not, on the inside.

If we want to do good and live for righteousness in our day and time and place, especially when we may be criticized or marginalized, then we have to cultivate Christian integrity. We have to guard our souls and tend to our hearts, so that who we are inwardly matches who we are outwardly. That's because other people, especially nonbelievers, need to see that we're the real deal. And your Christian conduct is part of what they will use to assess the validity of the Christian faith, and to decide whether to join us in glorifying God.

¹ Patrick Morley, *I Surrender: Submitting to Christ in the Details of Life* (Aurora: Woglemuth & Hyatt, 1990) n.p.

² Warren Wiersbe, *Be Myself* (Wheaton: Victor, 1994) 104.

³ From *Illustrations for Preaching and Teaching: from Leadership Journal*, ed. Craig Brian Larson (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1993) 118.