

1 Peter 2:11-17

11 Beloved, I urge you as aliens and strangers to abstain from fleshly lusts which wage war against the soul.

12 Keep your behavior excellent among the Gentiles, so that in the thing in which they slander you as evildoers, they may because of your good deeds, as they observe them, glorify God in the day of visitation.

Verse 11 begins a transition to the main body of the letter. Peter begins by reminding us that we are not part of this world (1:1); we are part of God's holy nation (verse 9). We are "aliens and strangers." The thought parallels Abraham's experience. Abraham called himself "a stranger and a sojourner" (Gen. 23:4). Hebrews 11:9-10 tells us that by faith Abraham lived as an alien in the land of promise, as in a foreign land. Historically, living as a stranger has always been part of God's process in forming His people.

Christians do not hold the values of the society in which they live. The world has a different god, values, loves, and focus than we do. The pleasures of the world that are socially acceptable are geared at stimulating ungodly desires. Peter says they "wage war against the soul." The soul is more than just the immaterial part of man; it is the whole person and the new identity he has in Christ that the war is waged against.

Inevitably, living in two worlds will lead to conflict. Jesus said we cannot serve two masters. Nevertheless, though our first loyalty is to God, we are also challenged to live in a right relationship to our society and then graciously endure the grief and alienation that will inevitably result.

The first century Roman world marginalized Christians simply because they were known to be different. Christians are to behave in such a way that even the unbelieving consider them virtuous by their own standards. If this is done, any accusations leveled against the believer will be seen to be malicious and unjust slander. In other words, we are to live by the good values of society that do not contradict the values of God.

"We must cultivate the mindset of exiles. We need to wake up so that we don't drift with the world and take for granted that the way the world thinks and acts is the best way. When you see yourself as an alien, an exile with your citizenship in heaven, and God as your only Sovereign, you stop drifting with the current of the day. You ponder what is good for the soul and what honors God in everything: food, cars, videos, bathing suits, birth control, driving speeds, bed times, financial savings, education for the children, unreached peoples, famine, refugee camps, sports, death, and everything else. Aliens get their cue from God and not the world." (Piper)

Something to notice in verses 11 and 12 is that the battle for the soul is also a battle for the glory of God. They are opposite sides of the same coin. These are first fought at the level of our desires and then at the level of our behavior—first at the level of what we feel, and then at the level of what we do.

Ted Kirnbauer

The goal of human behavior is the glory of God. God chose a people for Himself in order that they might be for Him a people and a name and a praise and a glory (Jer. 13:11; Isa. 43:21). In other words, God formed a people for Himself that they might make a name for Him—that they might spread His reputation and increase His fame and promote His renown. Peter says, “Keep your behavior excellent so that . . . the Gentiles might glorify God.” The positive significance of our lives is derived from whether our lives direct people's attention to the glory of God. God is glorified when the world who speaks evil against us sees our good deeds.

“If we live our lives in such a way that they don't point people to the glory of God, then our lives are without positive significance from a Christian standpoint. What we become is just an echo of a God-neglecting culture. We fit into the world so well that our lives don't point beyond the world. We are no longer aliens and strangers, but simply conforming citizens of the God-ignoring world” (Piper).

“And so let us fight first of all to be aliens and exiles in the world of the passions and desires. This means making God your passion. Fill your mind with things that exhibit the greatness and value and beauty and truth of God. And shun all the things that stimulate desires that compete with God. Regulate your life in order to cultivate a passion for God and the things of God. Be ruthless in cutting out of your life everything that stirs up desires displeasing to God.” (Piper)

Secondly, live life in a way where your behavior glorifies God. This is a constant theme throughout Scripture.

- Proverbs 4:23: Keep your heart with all vigilance; for from it flow the springs of life.
- Matthew 5:16: Let your light so shine before men that they may see your good deeds and give glory to your father in heaven.
- Titus 2:14: Christ gave Himself for us to redeem us from all iniquity and to purify for Himself a people of his own who are zealous for good deeds.
- Galatians 6:10: As we have opportunity, let us do good to all men, and especially those who are of the household of faith.
- James 1:27: Religion that is pure and undefiled before God and the Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction, and to keep oneself unstained from the world.
- Ephesians 2:10: For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand so that we would walk in them.

Doing good deeds before an on-looking world is a necessary part of declaring God's marvelous works and making Him a name on the earth. But the glory that we might bring to God also comes at the day of visitation.

The idea of God “visiting” people is used in the OT for God's intervention with grace for His people and judgment for the unbelieving (Isa. 10:3; 23:17; Jer. 6:15). The “day of visitation” is an expression paralleled in Luke 19:44 in referring to the incarnation of Christ. In I Peter 1:12 the day of visitation is

probably the day when Christ “visits” the earth a second time at His return. That day includes both judgment and salvation.

In other words, the testimony of believers in the world can have two results, both of which lead to the glory of God. First, as people observe your lifestyle that reflects the hope that is within you (1 Pet. 3:15), they too may believe and become one of the multitudes to glorify Christ at His return. However, the believers’ good behavior in a sinful world also becomes a testimony against the unbelieving who maligned them, and brings glory to God by attesting to the truth of the Christian gospel.

13 Submit yourselves for the Lord's sake to every human institution, whether to a king as the one in authority,

14 or to governors as sent by Him for the punishment of evildoers and the praise of those who do right.

15 For such is the will of God that by doing right you may silence the ignorance of foolish men.

Submission to secular human authority is defined in 2:13-15 as part of God’s will for the believer in order to silence ignorant slander. The good works that are to be done are not specified, although we might speculate that if they did not supersede the behavior of ordinary law-abiding citizens they would not stand out, and the believer would be seen as doing no more than what was expected. Perhaps Peter is suggesting that the believer should stand out as a model citizen, going beyond the call of duty. Jesus had told His disciples “whoever slaps you on your right cheek, turn the other to him also. If anyone wants to sue you and take your shirt, let him have your coat also. And if anyone forces you to go one mile, go with him two” (Matt. 5:39-41).

It is important to see that these verses put our social and political life in relation to God. The Bible is not a book about how to get along in the world. It is a book inspired by God about how to live to God. In Galatians 2:19 Paul said, "Through the law I died to the law that I might live to God." The aim of life—including our social and political life—is to live with God in view, under his authority, and for His good reputation.

Submit yourselves for the Lord's sake to every human institution

“Christians do not submit to human institutions simply because they feel like it, or because they have compliant personalities, or because the institutions have coercive powers. We do not look first at ourselves to see what we feel like doing, nor do we look first at the institution (like government) to see if it there are consequences for not submitting. We look first to God. We consult God about the institution. And we submit for his sake.” (Piper)

Peter did not live in an idealistic world. Nor did he live in a world of peace. He lived at a time when governments were extremely corrupt and Christians were persecuted.

John Piper gives a little historical background on the environment in which Peter was writing in:

In AD 37 a boy was born in Italy named Lucius Domitius Ahenobarbus. His mother's name was Agrippina the Younger. She married the Roman Emperor Claudius who adopted her little boy and changed his name to Nero Claudius Drusus Germanicus. The adoption and the name change were all part of his mother's plotting to see him, instead of Claudius' biological son Britannicus, become emperor of Rome.

In AD 54 when Nero was 17 years old, his mother arranged for Claudius to be poisoned to death, and the boy was proclaimed emperor of Rome. His reign would last 14 years, until he committed suicide at age 31.

In the first half of his reign, there was relatively good government because as a youth he received good counsel from Burrus, the head of the Praetorian Guard, and from Seneca the famous stoic philosopher.

Nero was selfish and calculating and incapable of ruling well on his own. He became paranoid of all the rumors about plots to kill him. In 55 he had his stepbrother Britannicus killed. In 59 he had his mother executed. And in 62 his first wife was executed. And Seneca his former counselor was forced to commit suicide. . .

The apostle Peter probably arrived in Rome sometime around AD 63.

In the night of July 19, 64, a fire broke out in the southern part of the city. It raged for six days, spreading far and wide. When it was about to die out, it suddenly broke out again in the northern part of the city and burned three more days. Ten of the 14 wards of the city were destroyed. The frenzy in the city was indescribable.

Rumors began to spread that Nero himself had started the fire because of his delirious craving for magnificence and desire to embellish and rebuild the city. To divert attention from himself, the historian Tacitus says, Nero blamed the Christians for the fire, since they were hated anyway and were good scapegoats.

The effect was horrendous. There had been no persecution like it since the Lord had risen 30 years before. In the gardens of Nero the Christians were crucified, sewn into wild beast skins and fed to dogs, drenched in flammable oil and lifted on poles to burn as torches in the night.

Eusebius tells us that Peter was crucified "because he had demanded to suffer" (E.H. 3.1.2–3).

Peter's letter was probably written some time shortly before this terrible persecution. Christians were being slandered and mistreated (2:12, 15) as he wrote, but this was typical all over the empire, he says in 5:9. The great persecution was not there yet. But it seems that Peter could see it on the horizon with prophetic accuracy. For example, he said in 4:12, "Beloved, do not be

surprised at the fiery ordeal among you, which comes upon you for your testing, as though some strange thing were happening to you."

Peter was well acquainted with corrupted leaders. Nero was not the only ruler Peter had known. He had known of Pilate, the governor in Judea, who washed his hands of Jesus' murder, had Him beaten, and turned Him over to be crucified with no grounds. He had known of Herod Antipas who executed John the Baptist as a dancing prize and later put his purple robe on Jesus and mocked Him with his soldiers. Peter was probably a boy in Galilee when he heard that Herod the Great had killed all the children in Bethlehem.

So Peter was not naïve about the vicious world of government corruption and wickedness. He did not live in a "Christian nation." He knew the depravity of human nature and the utterly ruinous corruption that political power can bring. This was the world into which he wrote our text: "Submit yourselves for the Lord's sake to every human institution whether to a king as the one in authority, or to governors as sent by Him . . . Honor all people, love the brotherhood, fear God, honor the king" . . .

The point of drawing attention to Nero and Pilate and Herod is not to say that there is a Nero or Pilate or Herod in power today in America. The point is to say that if Peter could command the Christian community to honor the king and the governor, knowing the wickedness of Nero and Pilate and Herod, then how much more must we honor the governor and the president who are not in that category—even though they may endorse and promote acts which we regard as immoral and even barbaric.

Although it is debatable when 1 Peter was written, it is not debatable that God foresaw the persecutions of Nero coming. God did not have Peter write a book that would be outdated in a few years when persecution intensified. Even if Peter was written in the earlier years of Nero's reign when things were relatively calm, the word of God is eternal and was intended to be applied under all circumstances in which we find ourselves.

NOTE: When Peter tells us that the purpose of kings and governors is to punish evil and praise good, he is giving God's purpose for government. We know this from Romans 13:4 where Paul says that civil authority "is a minister of God to you for good . . . [and] it is a minister of God, an avenger who brings wrath upon the one who practices evil." So what verse 14 expresses is not that God endorses whatever political leaders, dictators, or evil Lords do, it tells us what God designed government for. Governments do not save; they are to maintain external order in a world seething with evil so the saving message of the gospel can run and triumph on its own power.

**16 Act as free men, and do not use your freedom as a covering for evil, but use it as bondslaves of God.
17 Honor all people, love the brotherhood, fear God, honor the king.**

Verse 16 is related to the comments made on 1:18 (see notes there).

“What this verse teaches is that we belong to God and not the American government. We are slaves of God and not man (1 Corinthians 7:22–23). We do not submit to human institutions as slaves to those institutions, but as God's free people. We submit in freedom for His sake. Not in bondage for the king's sake.

God has transferred us in one profound sense from this age to the kingdom of His Son. We have passed from death to life. But then for a season He sends us back into this age, as it were, not as we were once—as slaves to sin and guilt and the whims of this age and its institutions—but as free people, as aliens who live by other values and other standards and goals and priorities. We do submit. But we submit freely, not cowering before human authorities, but gladly obeying our one true King—God.

Our whole disposition of freedom and joy and fearlessness and radical otherness from this world is rooted in our belonging to God—which in one sense is slavery (because his authority over us is absolute) but in another sense is glorious freedom (because he changes our hearts so that we love doing what he gives us to do).” (Piper)

In other words, we submit to governing authorities, not because they are equal in authority to God, but because God is the ruler and owner of both, and when you belong first to Him and His kingdom, you can be sent by Him, for His sake, for His purposes, for His glory into the kingdom of this world. If we use our freedom for evil, it means we misunderstand and are abusing it. We may have been set free from sin, the law, the penalty of the law and every other master, but we are slaves to God.

“In this way Christian submission to the institutions of this world becomes an act of tribute to God's authority over the institutions of the world. You look a king or a governor in the eye and say, "I submit to you, I honor you—but not for your sake. I honor you for God's sake. I honor you because God owns you and rules over you and has sovereignly raised you up for a limited season and given you the leadership that you have. For His sake and for His glory and because of His rightful authority over you, I honor you.”

So verse 13 subordinates all submission on earth to a higher submission to God when it says, "Submit for the Lord's sake." We keep the speed limit for God's sake, not because we might get a ticket. And all our driving becomes an act of worship.” (Piper)

Honor all men; love the brotherhood, fear God, honor the king.