

Faithful Presence & Hopeful Engagement

Sermons from 1 Peter 1-2 Sermon 7

1 Peter 2:11-17

June 13, 2021

The Rev. Dr. Samuel D. Ferguson, The Falls Church Anglican

11 Dear friends, I urge you, as foreigners and exiles, to abstain from sinful desires, which wage war against your soul. 12 Live such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us. 13 Submit yourselves for the Lord's sake to every human authority: whether to the emperor, as the supreme authority, 14 or to governors, who are sent by him to punish those who do wrong and to commend those who do right. 15 For it is God's will that by doing good you should silence the ignorant talk of foolish people. 16 Live as free people, but do not use your freedom as a cover-up for evil; live as God's slaves. 17 Show proper respect to everyone, love the family of believers, fear God, honor the emperor. (1 Peter 2:11-17, ESV)

In his book, *The World is Not Ours to Save: Finding the Freedom to Do Good*, the long-time activist and Anglican priest Tyler Wigg-Stevenson notes movement in interests among recent generations of Christians: "The mood of Christianity has decidedly shifted from the individualistic focus of the mid-twentieth century to the cultural engagement of today."¹

Tyler is correct. Especially among Millennials and their younger counterparts in Generation Z, Christians today want a faith that impacts more than personal spirituality. They want to know what Jesus has to say about the wounds and woes of the world around them.

Their instincts are good, as long as it doesn't come at the expense of an emphasis on the need for personal forgiveness or lose sight of the necessity of Jesus' death and resurrection. Then a heightened awareness of how Christianity impacts the world around it is welcome and biblical.

After all, Adam was not created only to commune with God. He was made to keep and guard God's creation. Israel was called not only to be a people close to God. The LORD says to His Servant in the book of Isaiah: "It is too light a thing that you should be my servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob and to bring back the preserved of Israel; I will make you as a light for the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth" (Isaiah 49:6). Jesus sends His disciples out to all nations.

And in our passage from 1 Peter for today, 2:11-17, Peter turns from addressing how Christians should relate to other Christians, to how Christians ought to relate to the world around them. Using the term “Gentiles” as a catchall for the surrounding culture, Peter says in v.12, “Keep your conduct among the Gentiles honorable.” In v. 13 he turns to relationships with civil authorities, “Be subject for the Lord’s sake to every human institution.” Then in an all-encompassing phrase, in v. 17 he simply says, “Honor everyone.”

The question of cultural engagement, of Christian interaction with the surrounding society, is not a question of *if*, but *how*. Yes, we must engage the world around us. We cannot withdrawal or hide. The question is, *how do we go about doing this?*

Our passage and the larger witness of Scripture situate engagement between the pitfalls of assimilation and conquest. We are not to engage the world by becoming it. Neither, however, are we called to a violent takeover. Rather, our passage suggests something that is more like a faithful presence. Let me show you where I get this idea from our passage, then explain it.

Presence

In verse 12, Peter says that Christians ought to live honorable lives so that the Gentiles may “see their good deeds and glorify God” (1 Peter 2:12). The word translated “may see” conveys the idea of something that can be closely observed; it is taking place in plain sight. This suggests that Christian life is something that our neighbors and society can plainly see. Christian life is not a private affair that we hide away or only show to our family. Christian life is a presence before the eyes of the world.

Faithful

By faithful, I am capturing the essence of what Peter says in verse 16: There, Peter says “Live as people who are free, not using your freedom as a cover-up for evil, but living as servants of God” (1 Peter 2:16). Christians have been freed from sin and death. They have become God’s chosen people, a holy nation. However, this is not a freedom that leads to license. It is a freedom that is experienced in servanthood before God. Christians are in the world as servants of God. Their engagement with the world is good inasmuch as it is done in faithful service to God.

Faithful Presence Stresses Dependence on God

Understanding Christian engagement with the world as faithful presence stresses something important about the posture of our engagement: **we are dependent on God.**

We do not bear the weight of the world on our own shoulders. We do not control the results of our work. We do not engage in order to be the hero of the story. Rather, we engage in such a way that we know we are utterly dependent upon God. The passage says we are “servants of God,” not “agents of change.” We follow God faithfully into whatever work He gives us. But we leave the results in His hands.

Notice that in 1 Peter 2:12, the good conduct of Christians leads some Gentiles to conversion: they “glorify God on the day of visitation.” However, later in 1 Peter 3:15–16, Peter calls Christians to be ready to make a defense to anyone regarding their faith, and he goes on, “yet do it with gentleness and respect,¹⁶ having a good conscience, so that, when you are slandered, those who revile your good behavior in Christ may be put to shame” (1 Peter 3:15–16). In this passage, Christian good behavior doesn’t lead to Gentile conversion, but to Gentile shame.

We are not the ultimate agents of change. God is. We are called to a faithful presence that means living our lives so the world can see and trusting God with the results. We are responsible for faithfulness; God takes the responsibility for ultimate fruitfulness.

Our passage now draws our attention to how faithful presence is practiced in two areas: in relation to our neighbors and society in general, and in relation to governing authorities.

I. The Presence of a Beautiful Life

In verses 11–12, Peter is concerned with how Christians relate among their neighbors and general society. In verse 12 we read, “Keep your conduct among the Gentiles honorable.”

The word conduct comes from a word that Peter uses often, which conveys the idea of a way of life. It has to do with one’s whole manner of living: not only how you behave, but what motivates and guides your life. This is the overall character, or atmosphere, of your life.

When I was in seminary, a very gifted friend and classmate of mine launched an arts journal. It featured poems, short stories, and photography—all done by Christian artists. The name of the journal was *Kalos*, which is a Greek word meaning good or beautiful or attractive. *Kalos* conveys the full force of something that is not only morally good, but also socially and aesthetically good. Something that is righteous, beneficial to others, and beautiful.

Peter says our way of life is to be honorable (v.12). The word translated as honorable is this Greek word *Kalos*. In verse 12, Peter is calling Christians to live lives among their neighbors and society that, in God's eyes, are beautiful.

The witness of a Christian life is not just in word, and not just in deed. It is conveyed through the full force of a life well lived. In 2:9, Peter says Christians “proclaim the excellencies of him who called them out of darkness into marvelous light.” This speaks of a testimony in words. Here in 2:12, he speaks of “good deeds,” which suggest concrete actions that are good. And he has also, as we've seen, used this phrase about a way of life that is honorable, or beautiful.

How do we live this holistic witness, this beautiful life?

Peter starts with a negative, what we don't do: “Beloved, I urge you as sojourners and exiles to abstain from the passions of the flesh, which wage war against your soul” (1 Peter 2:11).

A tremendous detriment to effective Christian engagement with the world is Christians behaving badly. Scandals, in-fighting, and complacency before sin turn faithful presence into an embarrassing stain. Also, Christians who are in the world and deep down are serving its idols and living for its fruits, undermine the Christian witness, too. The word “abstain” can mean “to distance.” When we go into the world, we first must examine our hearts and ask if they are beholden to, or rather, keeping a safe distance from the lusts of this world.

In *City of God*, Augustine said that at the heart of cultures are desires. He said that at the heart of Rome was a lust—the lust to dominate. The lust for power. Augustine said that at the heart of the Kingdom of God was not a lust to dominate, but a love of God and love of others.

After stating what we don't do, Peter turns to what we do, do. In verse 12 he speaks of "good deeds." This speaks of acts that both Christians and the world may agree upon as good.

Christian good deeds in the early years involved acts of service and care for people whom society had forgotten about or rejected. The type of charity that is common to our world was not so common in the Greek and Roman world.

Historian Tom Holland, in his recent book, *Dominion*, which considers Christianity's influence on the modern world, notes that the Greco-Roman world's view of mercy and charity was very different:

The heroes of the Iliad, favourites of the gods, golden and predatory, had scorned the weak and downtrodden. So too, for all the honour that Julian paid them, had philosophers. The starving deserved no sympathy. Beggars were best rounded up and deported. Pity risked undermining a wise man's self-control. Only fellow citizens of good character who, through no fault of their own, had fallen on evil days might conceivably merit assistance.²

Jesus taught His followers: "let your light shine before others, so that² they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven" (Matthew 5:16). There is a luminosity to Christian acts of service and love done for their neighbors.

While I lived in North Carolina, I heard a story of a pastor who was invited by the mayor of Durham to be a keynote speaker at a celebration of the life and legacy of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. It was an event to note good work in the community. This pastor leads a large and growing church, but also a church that was not always in line with the values of the world. This pastor was aware of some push back that the mayor was getting for asking him to speak.

Apparently, as he approached the podium the mayor asked him, "do you know why you're here?" to which he replied, "not really." The mayor said, "Because every time I turn around in our community, I see your people."

Christian engagement with the world happens when Christians live beautiful lives—lives marked by holiness and charity. Lives that speak the Gospel in word, deed, and the full witness of the character of our life.

Having said this, Peter turns to vv. 13-17 to what Christian presence looks like amid the political structures of his day. This is a massive and complex topic; we can only say a few things about it here.

II. The Presence of Humility

Peter opens v. 13, “Be subject for the Lord’s sake to every human institution.” He goes on to mention the emperor and governors. And says in v. 15, “For this is the will of God, that by doing good you should put to silence the ignorance of foolish people.”

Peter’s basic point is not that Christians should be slaves to world powers. His point is that Christians’ first posture should be as law-abiding citizens, not as violent revolutionaries. Understanding these verses requires getting into the historical and social context of Peter’s readers.

Peter knows there was suspicion among Romans about Christianity, which for them seemed like some offshoot of Judaism at best and some dark sect at worst. The fact that Christians called Jesus Lord meant they would not call Caesar Lord. This could be seen as an act of sedition, an overt attempt to undermine Roman peace. Peter does not want Christians to draw negative attention to themselves by willingly disobeying the emperor.

Peter also has just reminded them in v. 9, that they are “a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession.” In some sense, they were no longer citizens of Rome. But Peter did not want them to take this the wrong way. He did not want them to see their citizenship in God’s Kingdom as license to disrespect the governing structures God had given to society at large.

Peter is aware of a strand within Judaism that leaned towards violent revolt. There were the Maccabees just decades before Jesus who had won temporary political liberty from Rome. There were the Zealots during Jesus day who wanted Jesus to take up a sword and win geo-political victory. And in just a few years after Peter’s letter, a revolt among Jews would lead to Rome finally crushing Jerusalem and burning the Temple to the ground—never to be erected again.

But this was not the way Jesus taught. The Lord fought by laying down His life. The way of the Kingdom is a power that is different than the power of the world. It works by soft and subtle

persuasion, not by violent coercion. Peter is warning these Christians not to mistake their freedom as citizens of the Kingdom of God as license to disrespect the city of man.

This means Christians must engage with the government around them. “To be subject” does not mean Christians always, and in every case, obey. Peter says, “be subject for the Lord’s sake,” meaning, they must honor God in how they honor the emperor. And there are cases when God does overthrow the powers that be—just think of Pharaoh and Egypt.

But the general principle when it comes to the Bible’s teaching on human government is this: God providentially gives government to keep evil at bay, and as a platform for doing good and creating peace and flourishing for all people. The consistent testimony of the New Testament is that Christians pray for their leaders, respect their leaders, and, if they can engage in politics, do so in a manner to bring good change that aligns with the character and heart of God.

Peter reminded his readers in v. 11 that they were “sojourners and exiles,” meaning they weren’t at home in the Roman Empire. This is true of all Christians—we are never quite at home apart from our Lord.

But not all exile-hood is the same. There are fundamental differences between our situation and those Christians to whom Peter was writing, all of whom were under Roman rule. They lived under a tyrant and had not voting rights or options. We live in a democratic republic where we elect our own leaders.

We cannot simply throw up our hands and “submit to the emperor” as Peter enjoins because we do not have an emperor. Whether we want it or not we have a responsibility to engage in the political process in order to seek the common good. This means we need to redouble our efforts as we seek to understand the nature of the common good according to Scripture and then pursue it together, and that we need to prayerfully support and encourage Christians called to public service.

Our subjection to the governing authorities happens by our taking of responsibility for the opportunities we have, engaging the societal structures around us thoughtfully and prayerfully. Political engagement will also mean we have to learn to navigate differences and conflict with grace. Within the church we will not always agree on what the common good is or how we engage politically

for it. We may disagree on means, which policy or party we feel best serves the common good. But we should link arms around shared ends, that we want a world where individuals are safe, secure, treated with dignity, and free to express their faith whole-heartedly and according to their conscience.

We will also face conflict with the wider culture as we vote and run for office and seek to serve Christ in the public sphere. The values of Christ are not the values of America; our democracy is built on a foundation of religious liberty, and our nation is increasingly pluralistic. This means that our goal is not to impose a biblical understanding of all things on the American populace through the political process. We will need to respect difference. However, our efforts in local or national politics should be informed by Christian values and always seek to create space for the Gospel to draw people toward Christ.

I'll conclude with two simple but important notes of application:

1. Use Biblical Language

It will unify. When talking about engagement with the world, let us use biblical language. We too often get sidetracked by squabble over terms that have political baggage: One person will say they don't like the "culture war" mentality of past years, and another will say they are leery of "social justice warriors" of present days. None of these, however, are biblical terms for engagement. Rather than getting distracted by whether terms like "moral majority" or "social justice" are appropriate, inside the church let's use the Bible's language for engagement:

- Honor everyone (1 Peter 2:17)
- Do good (1 Peter 2:12)
- Love your neighbor (Mark 12:31)
- Love your enemies, do good to them (Luke 6:35)
- Seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you (Jeremiah 29:7)

I think you can find room for just about any good cause under these terms.

2. Be a Person Who Honors Others

Peter wrote “honor everyone” and “honor the Emperor” about a man who would behead him. This does not mean to turn a blind eye to sin, or that you cannot disagree. Jesus called Herod a fox. But Jesus also loved His enemies and did good to them (Luke 6:35).

In a culture of contempt, Christians can shine differently with a commitment to honor everyone. Honor the image of God in everyone you interact with—do this, and you will shine light a bright light in a dark world of contempt.

3. Force of Beauty in a Post-Truth World

This is a vision of the witness to Jesus conveyed through the force of a whole life.

Many thinkers have noted how in post-modern world, individuals are less persuaded by arguments that appeal manly to logic or reason. People are leery of so-called absolute truth claims. However, thinkers have noted that in the post-modern world, we have rightly called attention to the aesthetic aspect of truth.

When the Truth took on flesh, it was as a person, Jesus. The fullest expression of the Truth was displayed, not in mere words, not in a new code of law, but through the full force of a life.

There is a relationship between truth, goodness, and beauty. And it may be that it is the overall beauty of a Christian life through which God draws people to faith in His Son.

Endnotes

1. Tyler Wigg-Stevenson, *The World is Not Ours to Save: Finding the Freedom to Do Good* (InterVarsity Press, 2013), pg. 12.
2. Tom Holland, *Dominion: How the Christian Revolution Remade the World* (New York: Basic, 2019), pg. 523.