

“Strangers”

Today we're in the second week of our series in First Peter where we're talking about what it's like to live out our faith in an increasingly hostile culture.

We started (last week), talking about the five stages of religious persecution where, if you looked at persecution throughout church history, you'd find that there are five stages of how this (most often) plays out. There's stereotyping, vilifying, marginalizing, criminalizing and (then, finally) what we'd just call persecution. If you weren't here last week, I'd encourage you to go back and listen to what we shared. It helps set the stage.

Now, we live in a world (today) where there is a lot of stage five persecution. We don't experience it in this country, but it's happening. Every month, an average of 322 Christians are killed for their faith; an average of 214 churches or Christian ministries are destroyed; there's an average of 722 acts of violence, beatings, abductions, rapes, arrests against Christians because of what they believe. We don't experience much of that (stage five persecution) in our country, but there's an increasing amount of stage three marginalizing that happens.

For example, a UCLA graduate student was told she couldn't use the phrase “I want to thank my Lord and Savior Jesus Christ” in her graduation speech because it's too religiously focused. A university denied a Christian group (on their campus) because (quote) “the officers and leaders are required to agree with Christian teachings and values.” There's a Christian ministry in Florida that has been feeding the hungry (for years), but they were told they will no longer receive any funding if they don't remove the Christian symbol from their material and stop handing out Bibles. There are a number of examples of the marginalizing of the Christian faith in our culture. It's not hard to find.

The question is, “How are we going to respond to that? How are we supposed to engage with that?” And so we're in this series we're calling “Strangers,” because (as Christians), we find ourselves living in a culture that is so different than what we hold (as believers) to be of importance and value in life.

Peter is writing this letter to believers who find themselves in a stage five level of persecution. Under the Emperor, Nero, he would reign for five years. He's the one who burned the city of Rome and watched as it burned. He thought that would put an end to it and he'd rebuild it, but it didn't happen, so he needed someone to blame.

What he does is he blames the Christians, and then he goes on to carry out a series of very inhumane actions against those who are followers of Jesus. He sewed (Christians) into the skins of wild animals and then sent them out, hunted down (by dogs) until they were killed. He had Christians covered in wax and then he'd light them on fire as a way of lighting up his garden. Eventually, Peter (himself) would be crucified upside-down under Nero's persecution.

Peter is writing to Christians to tell them how they should live in this world where there's this increasing hostility. What he does is, he begins his letter by reminding them that this world is not their home. (We talked about this last week.) It's not their home. They are foreigners, strangers, aliens, exiles, people who are just passing through.

This is your identity (he says). This is who you are; it's not your home. As a result, there are implications for your life while you're here. There are things that apply to you (as followers of Jesus) that (otherwise) would not have applied. Because you are foreigners, strangers, exiles, just passing through, this is how you are to live.

Now, a lot of (what we're talking about) is becoming more relevant (for us), as Christians, as we (find ourselves) more and more (in this country) being out-numbered. How are we to respond? How are we to live when we find ourselves (because of what we believe) in the minority?

Now, this is a rather broad-stroke generalization, but there are (generally speaking) two ways in which Christians most often respond, neither of which is consistent with what the Bible tells us. The one response is a general appeasement. We just appease. We kind of give up and we give in. We don't want to upset anybody. We want everyone to like us. And so, we just go along.

You see it in a lot of churches. They do what they have to do because of what's happening in the culture. Their beliefs, their commitments, their values, they are constantly changing (and they're different) as things in the culture are different and they change. We'll spend more time on this next week.

The other response (often found), as Christians find themselves in the minority, is to go on the attack. (We've all seen it.) Things can get vicious and brutal. With a prideful and self-righteous spirit, (in the name of Jesus), they beat people over the head with their standards and then they curse them for running away. They berate people outside the church for not living by standards and values they never signed up for. It's an all-out attack.

I shared this last week, that I (honestly) find myself cringing when I see these kind of responses on social media where Christians are on the attack and they say things (you'd never find) Jesus saying. Or they just sit back and do nothing and "go with the flow" because they don't want anyone to be upset; this general appeasement.

And so we have these different approaches. Either I'm going to (go along) and fit in, or I'm going to become antagonistic and beat people (over the head) with it. One of the two (most often) happens, but neither is consistent with what Jesus wants.

And so, Peter says, let me give you a different strategy. Here's another approach that might actually work. Instead of giving in or going on the attack, (Peter says), because we are strangers, aliens, just passing through, (because of our faith), we can live with a joy and a peace (in our lives) even when things aren't going our way. We can.

That doesn't mean we're always smiling and happy and everything is good. In this world, it's not always good. (We know that.) But we can still be at peace and live with joy. And (finally) that's what's going to make us stand out.

In Peter's day, it wasn't good...for Christians; but in those first few centuries, the Christian church exploded. How come? Because there was this "joy" that the Christians had that others wanted. They wanted it.

They'd be brought into these coliseums where they would be fed to the lions. (You've seen the movies.) Do you know what the Christians would do, what they'd be doing, when they were dragged into these coliseums? They'd be singing. They'd be singing praises to God, because they had been (given the chance) to suffer for their faith in the name of Jesus. They'd be singing when it happened.

What do you do with that? They're being fed to the lions and they're still singing? Either, they're crazy and (they don't get it) or they've got it (and what they have) others wanted. The church exploded.

Peter picks up on that, in chapter one, in verse 13, (he says), "Therefore," (a transition word), because you are holy, because of who you are, "prepare your minds for action; be self-controlled; set your hope fully on the grace to be given you when Jesus Christ is revealed."

Jesus is coming back. (That's what Peter's saying.) He's going to claim you as his own. "Therefore," (he says), set your hope on what has been promised, and don't get caught up in worrying about what hasn't. Your identity is different. You're not always going to fit in.

Verse 14, "As obedient children, do not conform to the evil desires you had when you lived in ignorance." In other words, just because everyone else is doing something, don't (you do something) just to go along, just because they're doing something to go along.

Don't "conform" to the things you see happening. Don't fall into the mold of what this world is doing, just because the world is doing it. Don't act a certain way because everyone else is acting a certain way. (Don't let it happen.) Don't conform to what you see, don't be shaped by that mold, just because you see it. You're different.

Verse 15, "But just as he who called you is holy, so be holy in all you do; for it is written: 'Be holy, because I am holy.'"

That word "holy" is an important word. It means, literally, to be "set apart." You're to be set apart because of your relationship with Jesus. You're to be different; you're to be holy, because the one you follow (and to whom you belong) is holy.

Peter says, "Here's the mold for you; it's the holiness of God." (That's the mold for your life.) It doesn't shift, it doesn't change, it doesn't move, it doesn't get modified, it's not revised or evolving or (getting better) with time. It's the holiness of God. And it's different from the world. You are called to be different from the world.

Now, he doesn't say it's going to be easy. It's not going to be easy. For some of you, it'll be hard when you're at school. It'll be hard to stand out and to be different. It'll be hard at your work; it'll make you stand out, and not always fit in. That's not easy. But it's your call. It's who you are.

Look at the difference. (Verse 24), "All men are like grass, and all their glory is like the flowers of the field..." (You've seen the flowers of the field. You know how it works, what happens.) "The grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of the Lord stands forever." Peter says, your glory won't be blown away in the wind, because it's the holiness of God (and his Word), and that never changes. It never changes.

Now, in chapter two, "Therefore," (again, because of all of this – your holiness, the call to be different and to be set apart), Peter says, "rid yourselves of all malice and all deceit, hypocrisy, envy, and slander of every kind." (Get rid of it, he says.) One translation says, (because of who you are), it's time "to clean your house." (I like that.) It's time clean your house. It's time to clean up your life.

Peter gives us this list of things we need to get rid of. Maybe (when you were reading) your thing isn't on that list. Maybe your thing is on one of the other lists. There are a lot of lists like this in the New Testament, things we're to (get rid of) because of who we are. If your thing isn't on this list, it doesn't mean you're not to get rid of it.

Peter uses this repentance talk (things we do because we're to be holy, ways to clean our house) by talking about things we're to get rid of in our lives. You need to get rid of these things.

(Verse 2), "Like newborn babies, crave pure spiritual milk..." There's a lot of not-so spiritual milk we can drink. (You've probably noticed that.) We're to crave 'spiritual milk.'; "so that by it (he says) you may grow up in your salvation, now that you have tasted that the Lord is good."

Do you see what he says? Do you see what he's doing? Who is Peter talking to? He says, "so that by it you may grow up in your salvation, now that you have tasted that the Lord is good." (Who's he talking to?) He's talking to Christians. He's talking to those of us who have tasted what the Lord has to offer.

We've been saved. We've been ransomed. We've been bought with the blood of Christ. We've tasted that the Lord is good. He's not talking to non-Christians. He's talking to Christians. He's talking to us; talking to you.

What we find is (and this is so different from how so many Christians often act). What happens when you try to tell someone (who has not tasted that the Lord is good), "Here's how you are to live," what happens? It doesn't happen. It doesn't work. But when you've tasted it and you've experienced it and you have seen what it does in your own life, then you want even more of it; you crave it, like a newborn baby craves the milk of its mother.

What's Peter saying? He's saying that our holiness is not just what we get rid of, it's what we chase after. (Do you see that?) It's not just stopping what isn't right (in your life), but chasing after what is. We're to crave it. We're to long for it. We want to have more of it.

Now, here's what I want you to catch. Peter is calling the church to holiness, to repentance, to getting rid of things that are not right, to clean its house, but he is not calling the world out. He's calling Christians out. (That's what he's doing.) And it's important.

All throughout the New Testament when Peter (and Paul) talk about living holy lives, they're writing to Christians who are living in a culture that's not friendly to Christians; all throughout the New Testament. When they're writing, they're writing to believers. In this hostile culture, a world that is so different (when you're the minority), he's not calling the world out. "Here's how you should live; what you should do." (He's not doing that.) He's calling Christians out.

In a world where you're the minority, where you have a chance to be different and to make a difference, here's how you should live. Here's what you should do. And when you do it (and you live it), you will be different, and it will (give you a chance) to make a difference.

I don't think Peter, I don't think Paul, expected non-Christians to live like Christians. (I don't think so.) In fact, it kind of surprises me that anyone would think that. (That's not who they are.) Why would they live like that? But (often) that's how we think.

Why would anyone who hasn't "tasted that the Lord is good" and hasn't heard the good news of Jesus, why would they live like they have? They wouldn't.

Peter says, “We need to start with our own house.” We need to clean our own house, and not think it’s our job to tell the world (everyone else) to clean theirs. That’s not our job. We are to be holy (as Christ is holy) and not spend so much time worrying about the non-holiness of the world.

Jump to verse 9, (it’s the same thing); Peter says, “But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light.”

It’s the same thing. You’re to be holy, you are holy, not for the purpose of calling out the world, but for the purpose of calling the world to Christ.

One translation says, “You are God’s chosen instruments to do his work, and to speak out for him; to tell the world of the night and day difference he made for you.” (I like that.)

That’s what you’re to do. (That’s your job.) You are to tell others of the night and day difference he made for you. That’s a lot different than telling someone how they are to live. There’s to be humility in our witness (Peter says), there’s to be a humbleness in who we are.

Here’s the difference he has made in my life. Here’s what Jesus has done for me...in my work, in my marriage, in my relationships, in my family, how I treat others. There’s a night and day difference, and it’s not me, it’s him. (That’s to be our witness.)

And so he says, (verse 10), “Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.” In other words, you were nothing (he says) before Jesus, and you are nothing (apart from Jesus). But in him and because of him (and through him) you now have the chance to be something (you were not) for him.

Do you see the difference? There’s a big difference, not only in us (because of Jesus), but in our witness to the world. We are God’s chosen people. We are the ones he has set apart to do his work. And our work, (your work) is to be done in humility, in holiness, in using every chance you have to let the world know of the night and day difference Jesus can make.

And so, let me close with this. And this is what I believe it comes down to for us as Christians. Living in a culture (as we do) that is becoming more and more unaccepting of who we are and what we believe, here’s what it comes down to: As the world becomes increasingly hostile (toward us), we (as the church) are to become increasingly holy (with humility) for Christ.

Holiness, with humility, that’s to be our witness; because we are (after all) strangers in this world, we’re aliens, just passing through. And so, while we’re passing through, our calling is to make a difference for Jesus. Amen.