

“Strangers”

Dear Friends, Greetings in the name of our Lord Jesus. Today we're in the third week of a series we're calling “Strangers.” It's based on the first letter of Peter, in which Peter is writing to Christians to encourage them to live out their faith in what was becoming an increasing hostile culture.

Under the reign of Nero (we've been studying), the Christians who had been (at first) feeling pushed out and ostracized, marginalized by those around them, what was happening was they were now beginning to feel a more physical persecution that would (in some cases) end up costing them their life. Peter is writing to encourage them to stay the course. He wants them to know (in light of all of this) how to respond.

Now, there's this natural inclination for most people (I believe) to respond in ways similar to what has just happened. When someone comes against us, it's easy to want to come against them. There's this natural instinct to want to fight back. Peter knows that all too well.

He was the one (if you remember) known for being impulsive, for acting on the emotion of the moment. Take it from a guy (he says) who pulled out his sword and cut off the ear of one of the soldiers when Jesus was arrested. Don't be impulsive. Don't just react. Let's be intentional (he says) about how we're going to respond, especially when we face pressure, and we feel like we're on the defense.

What he does is, he starts (in chapter one) by reminding the believers of who they are. You are God's chosen people (he says); you are “strangers” in this world, exiles in a place that is not your home. Your home is heaven and so, (while you're here), this is how you are to live, this is how you should respond. Instead of fighting back (he says), (as Christians) we should approach life with a spirit of joy and gladness, because of whose we are and where we know we are heading.

Last week, we were challenged to live holy and humble lives, even when we want to stand up and lash out. Peter tells us not to “conform” to the way things are done in this world, but to conform to life of Jesus and to the “holiness of God.” That should be our standard: the holiness of God. God's word stands forever (he says). It never changes. It's the consistency of (God's Word) to which we are called to conform.

We've been “saved by grace through our faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, and not because of anything we have done.” That's our faith. That's our conviction. It's the foundation of the scriptures that define (and shape) who we are. That was last week.

This week we're going to be challenged to respond (as strangers), not just with our convictions (with what we believe), but with compassion for those for whom Jesus died. It's the compassion of Jesus, (alongside of our) convictions that needs to shape how we live.

Let's start with a basic distinction, and I believe it's an important one to understand (if we're going to get this right), between our beliefs and our convictions. (There's a difference.) Let's start with our beliefs.

A belief (if we could define it this way) is (nothing more than) a recognition of a truth. (That's what it is.) It's this cognitive recognition that this (whatever this is) is true. (Two plus two equals four. The earth revolves around the sun.) Whatever it is, I realize it. I recognize it, (I believe) that this is true. (That's a belief.) A belief is a recognition of a truth.

A conviction (in contrast) goes beyond that. (It's more than that.) I believe this. I recognize that it's true. A conviction, goes beyond that. A conviction is a demonstration of what I believe. It demonstrates that my belief really matters. It's a conviction.

In other words, it's lived out. It's not just something we've accepted to be true, but it's something that's important, that's foundational to our life. In the Christian life, it's something we're basing our life upon, we're building our life upon. It's a conviction.

The question is, “How do we know which is which?” How do we know if something is a conviction or a belief? How do we know? We know when we start getting pushed on what we believe, when we start feeling the pressure (from the outside) for what we are feeling (and believing) inside. When we start living it out and (as a result) we start (standing out) that's when we'll find out if what we believe is simply a belief or a conviction.

Howard Hendricks puts it this way. He says, “A belief is something you will argue about. A conviction is something you will die for.” (There’s a big difference.) Something you’ll argue for, versus something you’ll die for. For the people to whom Peter was writing, they we’re being asked to die for what they believed, and, in so doing, they found out if they were really convicted.

Peter says that’s what’s going to happen when you start standing up for what you believe. There’s going to be this pressure. There’s going to be this push to get you to back down in your convictions. And (for many people) when that happens, there’s this tendency to give in and to just go along.

(You know how that works.) As long as you believe something and keep your beliefs to yourself, no one cares. But when you stand up for (what you believe) and in standing up for your beliefs, you stand out (and sometimes, even against), that’s when you’ll start feeling the pressure. That’s also when you’ll find out if something is simply a belief or if it’s a conviction.

And so (as Christians) here’s the tension for us, when it gets down to what’s happening (in our world) and culture today. Here’s what we’re called to do. We’re called to live with conviction (in our lives) and, at the same time, to do so with compassion to those we meet. That’s the tension we face.

The trouble is (and this is where it gets tough) is that those two ideas (conviction and compassion), they’re often placed (and positioned) as if they are in conflict with each other. If you live with conviction, if you believe these things are true and these things are not true, then (in our world today) you’re (thought of) as not being a very loving person. Our convictions (often times) get labeled as being...intolerant.

That’s a word that gets thrown around a lot these days. The dictionary defines it this way. (It says), “Tolerance is to recognize and respect other’s beliefs, practices, etc...without sharing (or agreeing with) them.” (That’s tolerance.)

That’s what Jesus did. He respected and recognized other beliefs and practices, but he didn’t share them. He didn’t believe them. He lived with conviction. (That’s what he calls us to do.)

The problem is (these days), (and I hope we’re not spending too much time with this) when it comes to tolerance, according to the book, “The New Tolerance,” about 80% of the time, “when you hear the word “tolerance”, it’s generally understood that “every individual’s beliefs, values, lifestyles, and perception of truth-claims are equal.” That’s the “new tolerance.” Every truth-claim is equal.

Now, if you think about it, that’s ridiculous. It’s intellectually not honest. When two things that are in contradiction with each other are both said to be true, it’s not possible. They can’t both be true at the same time. It’s not honest. But it happens. (It’s all around us.) It’s the new tolerance.

When Christians talk like that, like what I just said, that these two things can’t be true at the same time, they’re labeled with names like intolerant, prejudiced, judgmental, narrow-minded. (No one likes being called by names.) And so, what often happens is, they end up changing their beliefs to fit in with the culture, so as to avoid being labeled in these ways.

When that happens, (what they’re doing) is they’re turning this whole thing around. They’re overturning the foundation of our beliefs, the way in which the Bible is meant to be used. What they’re doing is they’re reversing the order. Instead of using the lens of scripture to interpret the culture, they’re using the lens of culture to interpret scripture. (It’s backwards.) It’s turned around. It’s called “Progressive Theology.” We need to be careful that we don’t do that.

All throughout scripture, people (in the Bible) are called to be people of conviction. Our convictions matter. (We can’t back down.) At the same time, we’re also called to be people of compassion. (That’s where we find the tension.) If we don’t hold these two together, (conviction and compassion), it doesn’t take long before we turn our neighbors into the enemy. And when that happens, the only who wins is our real enemy...and then we all lose.

As Christians, we are called to have convictions, (there’s no question about it). We are to be people of conviction; not just people who have beliefs. We’re to live them out.

But (equally important) as our convictions, we’re called to be known to the outside world by what? (We need to get this right.) More than our convictions, we are to be known (to the world)...by our love. (Jesus said), “They will know you are my disciples by your love.” We are to have convictions (as Christians), but we are to be known (to the world) by our love.

Peter talks about how this kind of compassion (living in a hostile culture) should mark our lives. In chapter 3, (starting in verse 8), he says, “Finally, all of you, live in harmony with one another; be sympathetic, love as brothers, be compassionate and humble.” (That’s how we are to live.) He goes on.

(Verse 9), “Do not repay evil with evil or insult with insult, (or Facebook post with Facebook post), but with blessing, because to this you were called so that you may inherit a blessing.” (We’ve been blessed and we will be blessed, so we’re called to be a blessing.)

In chapter four, it’s the same thing, (verses 8 & 9), “Above all, love each other deeply, because love covers over a multitude of sins.” (It covers a lot of our failings.) “Offer hospitality to one another without grumbling.” That word “hospitality” is actually a compound word that (literally means) “love strangers.” Love those who are not part of your group.

In chapter two, verse fifteen, (again), “For it is God’s will that by doing good you should silence the ignorant talk of foolish men.” By doing good, (not by becoming angry or upset), by doing good (in this culture...acts of kindness and generosity), you will silence the talk of ignorant people. (That’s what he says.) That’s what Jesus wants. That’s God’s will for you.

Here’s what Peter is telling us. Here’s what he wants us to see. (It’s not that hard to follow.) Pull the two together. (What he’s saying is), when people witness our compassion, they will want to know more about our convictions. When what they see in us is our compassion for the world, they will want to know what drives our convictions. (That’s when it’ll happen.)

If all they see (and hear) are our convictions, there will never be opportunity for our compassion. But if they feel (and see) our compassion, (in acts of caring and kindness and love), then there will be a chance (at some point) along the way to share our convictions and beliefs. (There will.)

Do you know what happened in church history? It’s an interesting study. If you follow the history of the church for those first few centuries, the Christians were under extreme persecution. It was not easy being a Christian in those first few centuries. It wasn’t.

But what happened to the church (during those same times) when they were under persecution? They had no power, no opportunity for government, no influence in ways that (everyone thought) mattered? What happened? The church exploded. And it exploded (How come?), because the church was known for its love.

Abortion is not new to our day. Infanticide was happening back then. Female babies, any unwanted child, any child who had anything wrong, do you know what they did? They left them along the roads, dropped them in the woods, until they died. (That was the culture.)

The Christians (in that culture) would have nothing of it. What they did is they went out and found those babies and took care of them (and loved them). It was the beginning of what we call orphanages today. That’s what they did. (It was the Christians.)

The church’s response to women (who had no power) in those days? (It was the same thing.) Read chapter three (in First Peter). It sounds chauvinistic to our 21st century ears (when Peter says) “Husbands, be considerate of your wives...and treat them with respect...as the weaker partner.” It sounds like a male-dominated power play, to us. But to them, in that culture, it was a radical step away from what was understood as the norm...in favor of women. (Again, it was the Christians who took the lead.)

Young women (in those days), do you know what happened? They were often times forced to marry, sometimes even before they were in their teens. (They were forced.) What happened was, the church stood up for them and said (if you’re not ready) and want to wait, there’s a better way. Let’s wait, and we’ll help you. (Again, it was the Christians.)

The widows (in those days), there was no social security or avenues for support. The church stepped in and provided the support. Rather than having to remarry (as widows) for security, the church became their security. They found their security (in the Church) in Christ.

During those years (in those first few centuries) the church exploded. How come? Because it operated not from a position of power, but from a posture of love; love was the driving force (in the early church) and it grew.

Now, keep following the history, for the next few centuries and what happened? Christianity grew and (eventually) took power; and when it came (into power), it started operating from a position of power and from a posture of power. (Guess what happened, when that happened?)

When Christianity went from winning the world through love, to winning the world through power, it fell apart. Instead of growing, it stopped growing. Instead of winning people for Christ, it began to push them away in the name of Christ.

Now, fast-forward to 2017. It's the same thing today. Whenever we trade love for power, as a way of influencing the world, it doesn't work. But when love becomes the defining characteristic of our lives, when we're known to the world not by our convictions but by our compassion, that's when our influence in the world (for Jesus) will actually work. That's what Peter is telling us. That's what Jesus wants.

Let me close with this. Have you ever gone to the Mall and found yourself just walking around and hanging out? I did that the other night (with Mary). I'm not a mall (kind of guy), but it was fun to just walk around. We were walking around (through the mall), ended up in the food court, and there was this woman handing out samples.

At the time, I wasn't that hungry, I really didn't need to eat, and (honestly) I wasn't ready to eat, but she was handing out these samples and so I took one and I ate it. It was this piece of chicken (from one of these Asian restaurants) and (when I ate it) even though I wasn't ready to eat it (and wanting to eat it), it actually tasted pretty good. We kept walking.

What happened was, (full disclosure), we had this coupon for another place in the Food Court, so we ended up eating there. But I couldn't stop thinking about that chicken. It was actually pretty good. Next time I end up eating at the Mall, I think I (already know) where I'll end up.

And so, what's the point. The point is, I think that's what Peter is telling us. I think that's exactly what Jesus wants us to do. In this world that is hungry and doesn't even know it, wandering around and doing its own thing.

At some point, there will be opportunity for us to hand out a few samples. A taste of love, a sample of grace, a bite of acceptance and forgiveness and compassion; whatever it is that person needs (at the time) that Jesus has to offer. Our job is to hand out those samples; keep handing out those samples.

When we do, we will begin to stand out and people will notice. And when they notice, they might want to sit down and spend some more time. Then we can share our convictions, the things (for which) and the (reason behind) what it is we would die for. But it needs to start with compassion, before sharing our convictions. Our calling (as strangers in this world) is to be known to the world by our love. Amen.

Lord Jesus, we thank you for all you have done for us, in your life, on the cross, in rising from the dead. We thank you for the hope we have in you, for the home waiting for us in heaven, and for the calling to live as your people. Lord, help us to be people of conviction, deeply rooted and tied to the foundations of our faith. Help us to build our lives on those truths and to not waver in standing up for what we know to be true.

At that same time, help us to be known to the world (not so much) by our convictions, but by our compassion. Fill us with your love, empower us by your Spirit, that our love for others might lead them to you. In your name we pray. Amen.