

“Strangers”

Dear Friends, greetings in the name of our Lord Jesus. Today we're in the final week of our series on First Peter where we're looking at what it was like for the (early Christians) to live in a world that was becoming increasingly more hostile toward them. Peter is writing to encourage them in their faith and to remind them (as followers of Jesus) how they are to live.

We've been talking about a lot of things in this series that were not only part of their world (back then) but that are also part of our world today. In some parts (today) it's still just as extreme. (We could point to many places where following Jesus might end up costing you your life.) Here in the United States, it's not even close. But it is, nonetheless, a reality that is becoming more relevant, all the time, as Christians (in our culture) in varying ways are being pushed to the fringes, marginalized, ostracized, and (in many cases) left out.

What we're finding in Peter's letter is that there are some basic truths we need to keep in mind as we go through life. Being a Christian (in a world that is not) is not always easy, but understanding what it means (to be a follower) is not that hard to follow.

There are some basic truths Peter lifts up in his letter. 1) God has done it all for us (in Jesus) and our salvation (his promise of heaven) is something we never have to question. All that was needed was accomplished for us on the cross. All that was necessary for our (being saved) was done for us in Christ. It's a given.

2) His Word (in the Bible) comes to us as a gift, and so (as a result) we follow it, we believe it, we trust it, and (because it's God's Word to us), we allow what it (says to us) to shape who we are.

3) As a result of what God has done, what he's given, the Christian life is a life of thankfulness and joy, even when things are not so joyful. In all things (Peter says) we can give still thanks.

And (4), because of all of that, what he has accomplished, his Word, how we can be joy-filled, we should always be ready to share (with others) what we have come to know (about Jesus) and the hope we have in him. We need to be ready to share. (Peter says) that's the Christian life. That's what God wants us to know.

Now, maybe it seems a bit strange (in this series) to be talking about how (in this country) as Christians, we are in the minority. According to almost any survey, it doesn't seem to be the case. The numbers are somewhere around the 75% range when it comes to how people self-identify their religious beliefs. About 75% self-identify as Christians. That doesn't sound like a minority.

In trying to understand this, I came across some work done by a man named Ed Stetzer. Dr. Stetzer serves as Executive Director of the Billy Graham Center for Evangelism and he has planted, revitalized and pastored a number of churches, along with training pastors and church planters on six different continents.

In one of his publications, trying to help us better understand how (with 75% self-identifying as Christians), how followers of Jesus are feeling like they're in the minority, he talks about how there are (really) three different categories of Christians in our country. And he says (what he says) not as a judgment, but as a distinction. (I found this distinction to be helpful.)

He says (these three categories) there are Cultural Christians, Congregational Christians, and Convictional Christians; Cultural Christians, Congregational Christians, and Convictional Christians. (Let's take them one at a time.)

Starting with the Cultural Christians, a Cultural Christian is a person who (when asked) about their religion, says that they are Christian. They don't (not) believe in God. They're not atheists. They know they believe something, so they say they are Christians.

Maybe their parents were Christians or their grandparents were Christians. They haven't rejected it, so (when asked) that's what they say. It's (often times) more a matter of their heritage than their heart.

They go to church (at least a few times) each year. They're not against it, but it's not central in their life. They have their life (and it's a part of their life), but it's not central. They're Cultural Christians.

According to Dr. Stetzer, this category represents about one-third of the (75%) of Christians in our country, about 25% of the entire population. About one-third (of Christians) fall into this category.

The next category is Congregational Christians. This is a group that is more committed than the Cultural Christians, but not really committed. They most likely belong to a church and (if not that) they can, at least, point to a church (they consider) to be their home, but it's still not a defining part of their life. They have their life and they have their beliefs and they have a connection to a church, but their life is not shaped by their beliefs or by their involvement. They are (what he calls) Congregational Christians and, again, this group represents the same number, about one-third of the 75% of those who call themselves Christians in this country. About one-third falls into this category.

The last group is what he refers to as Convictional Christians. This is a group that is striving to live according to their faith. They not only belong to a church, but they go to church. They read their Bibles, they spend time praying, (they're not perfect), but they know they have been perfected in Jesus, and they're doing their best to follow.

Their faith is at the core of their life. It's the hub around which everything else revolves. Their finances, their relationships, their family life, their marriages, their sexuality, their purpose for living, it's all connected to their faith. It's all seen through this biblical lens.

Again, Dr. Stetzer says that this group also represents about one-third of all Christians and about 25% of the entire population. They are the Convictional Christians.

Now, here's what he says is happening in our culture. Since 1972, (he says) you have entire population, about 75% who claim to be Christian. Here's what's happening. As the pressure against (being a Christian) has increased (in our culture) and as the cost of (living as a Christian) continues to rise, those who are Cultural Christians and Congregational Christians, the numbers are declining.

It used to popular to be a Christian. It was often to your advantage. It might have helped you in your job, in the community. It's no longer the case. As the pressure against Christians has mounted, these two categories (Cultural and Congregational) have declined. It's no longer to their advantage, so they've backed off.

What hasn't changed, he says, (and this is what I found interesting) are the percentages of the Convictional Christians. Since 1972, this number has remained about the same, about 25% of the population. As the other two categories have been on the decline, this one category has remained consistent.

Here's his conclusion. (He says), "The church isn't dying. It is just being more clearly defined." It's not dying; it's just being more clearly defined. And that (my friends) is not bad. It's not a bad thing. It's not dying off; it's just being more clearly defined.

What that means is, (for us) we have an incredible opportunity to stand out for Jesus. We have an incredible opportunity. As Christianity becomes (less popular) in our country and more clearly defined, that gives us (as followers of Jesus) a chance to let the world know what being a Christian really means.

It's not this cultural thing where you (just do it) because others are doing it. (That's not what it is.) And it's not a congregational thing where you just get your name on some (role book) or roster, there's a building toward which you can point. (It's far more than that.) We have an incredible opportunity to help the world see what following Jesus is all about. And that's where (and why) what Peter says (to us) in his letter is so important.

Now, this isn't the first century and the (beginning of the church); it's the twenty-first century and the church has been around for a long time. As a result, there's a lot of baggage we carry (in this culture) because of 2000 years of church history. (It's hasn't all been pretty; much of it has, but not all.) There's a lot of baggage.

But with ever bag we carry, we have a chance to unpack it and share what's inside of it. We have a chance to speak it and to tell it, and to live it; to let the world know, not only about the baggage we carry (and what's in it), but about the cross Jesus carried and why he needed to carry it.

As a minority in our culture (more clearly defined) we have a chance to stand out and to let the world see what being a follower of Jesus is all about. But, in order to do that, (Peter says), we need to be prepared. We need to be ready for what is (going to happen) when it happens. If we're not prepared (he says), we're not ready, instead of acting on what's happened, we'll probably be reacting to what happens, and that's not what we want. We need to be ready.

Look at some of these verses in what Peter writes. Starting in chapter 4, verse 1, "Therefore, since Christ suffered in his body, arm yourselves also with the same attitude, because he who has suffered in his body is done with sin. As a result, he does not live the rest of his earthly life for human desires, but rather for the will of God."

Peter says we need to have the same attitude as Jesus. When it comes to living as Christians and being willing to suffer, we should have the same attitude (toward suffering) as Jesus had toward suffering. He didn't fight back. He didn't lash out. He didn't trade insult for insult. (We talked about this last week.) He wasn't living for himself (or to please the world) but for God and to do his will. That same attitude needs to become ours.

Jump down to verse 12, (he says), "Dear friends, do not be surprised at the painful trial you are suffering, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice that you participate (that you share) in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed."

In other words, Peter says it's going to happen, so when it happens, don't be surprised. It's only a surprise if you don't know it's going to happen. (That's when it's a surprise.) It's a surprise if you don't know it's going to happen. It's going to happen (he says), so now that you know it's going to happen, don't be surprised when it happens, because now you know.

In chapter 5, verse 6, "Humble yourselves, therefore, under God's mighty hand, that he may lift you up in due time. Cast all your anxiety on him (Peter says) because he cares for you."

I'll make a confession. This is a verse I need to read every day. This is a truth I need to remember every day, because every day brings its own reason for being anxious. Every day, there's something in life (about which) to be anxious, especially if we forget.

Peter says, "Don't forget." Humble yourself before God and he will lift you up. Give all your anxieties to him, and he'll carry them, because he cares for you. I need to remember that...every day. Something tells me (in needing to remember) I'm not alone.

Verse 8: "Be self-controlled and alert. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour." (That's quite the image he gives us, quite the picture he paints, but it's true. He's our enemy and he wants nothing more than to take us down.) Peter says, "Resist him, standing firm in the faith, because you know that your brothers throughout the world are undergoing the same kind of sufferings."

We need to be prepared (Peter says), with the same attitude as Jesus, and don't be surprised when it happens, (give your anxieties to him), because our enemy is real. It's going to happen. (He's going to come after you.) But he's not going to win, because the victory has already been won for us on the cross.

This first letter of Peter is not a hard letter to follow, even though (in following it) it may (at times) be hard. It's not always easy to be a Christian, but understanding what it means to be (a follower of Jesus) is not that hard to follow.

And so, let me close this series with this. And here, I want to circle back to what we said (at the beginning) about some of the basic truths Peter is lifting up and wanting us to hear. As I think about the Christian life and about our calling as followers of Jesus, and as I consider what it means to live faithfully in a culture where we are increasingly becoming the minority, a number of Bible verses come to mind.

The first is one we've all heard before, maybe even committed to memory. It's the gospel message, the good news of what God has done for us in Jesus. John 3:16: "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him might not perish but have eternal life." The good news of the gospel from John 3:16.

The second is one that tells of the practices and the attitude (as Christians) we are to have. It's written by the apostle Paul and it comes from Colossians 3:16: "Let the Word of Christ dwell in you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom, and as you sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts toward God." The gospel, John 3:16; our practices and attitudes, Colossians 3:16.

The third is from 2 Timothy 3:16, again, written by Paul. "All scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting, and training in righteousness..." God's word is our foundation, and it's given to us for a reason, and the reason (it's given) is that we might become a living witness to Christ...2 Timothy 3:16.

The final verse is from 1 Peter, not 3:16, but 3:15, and this is one, if we are to be effective in our witness and faithful in our calling, we all need to remember and take to heart. 1 Peter 3:15, "But in your hearts set apart Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope you have. But do this with gentleness and respect..."

John 3:16, the gospel. Colossians 3:16, our attitude and our practice. 2 Timothy 3:16, for our training in becoming the image of Christ. And 1 Peter 3:15, the calling to always be ready to share the hope we have in Jesus.

The church is not dying. It's simply becoming more clearly defined. We have a tremendous opportunity to start unpacking what's in our bag. Amen.