

# Bible Exposition: 1 Peter 2:11-17

Graduate & Faculty Ministries National Staff Meetings

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*Robin Capcara*

On Tuesday, Bobby [Gross] set us up beautifully for our Bible study together this morning by introducing us to the opening lines of I Peter. We saw that Peter addressed his letter to the “Exiles of the Diaspora” and Bobby reminded us of the powerful meaning that both Exodus and Exile have had in the life of God’s people. We saw that beautiful Trinitarian formulation of God’s rescue operation—the Father elects, the Spirit sanctifies, Jesus sprinkles us with His blood—all so that we can become obedient to Him. We saw that these “Exiles of the Diaspora” were experiencing some sort of trials, some kind of suffering---but that their hope was sure because their future is being kept safe by Jesus.

Well, I Peter is a beautifully concise summary of Christian doctrine and conduct as well as the relationship between the two---in other words, how our beliefs should shape our behavior. As Scot McKnight says, “*Peter intends his readers to understand who they are before God so that they can be who they are in society.*” (I Peter: NIV Application Commentary, Zondervan, 1996, p. 36) And that’s where we’ll be turning our gaze this morning.

You should have the passage, I Peter 2:11-17 in your packet. If you’ll just pull that out, I’ll read the passage and you can follow along. [READ]

*Beloved, I urge you as sojourners and exiles to abstain from the passions of the flesh, which wage war against your soul. Keep your conduct among the Gentiles honorable, so that when they speak against you as evildoers, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day of visitation. Be subject for the Lord’s sake to every human institution, whether it be to the emperor as supreme, or to governors as sent by him to punish those who do evil and to praise those who do good. For this is the will of God, that by doing good you should put to silence the ignorance of foolish people. Live as people who are free, not using your freedom as a cover-up for evil, but living as servants of God. Honor everyone. Love the brotherhood. Fear God. Honor the emperor.*

At 2:11, the beginning of our section for today, Peter is transitioning **from** his introductory remarks, in which he is reminding the recipients of who they are in Christ and what God has done for them; and transitioning **to** the heart of his argument-- **how to live as the people they really are in Christ.**

It seems that tensions had arisen in the Christian community about how best to respond to and engage with the foreign culture in which they found themselves. Peter seems to be counseling against both a “passive” temptation among some Christians to lay low, and assimilate into the culture in order to avoid persecution and suffering; and a more “active” temptation to fight back against the culture.

It seems that at least part of the trials they are experiencing involves being slandered by “the Gentiles”, the non-believers. Untrue and unflattering things are being said about the Christians--Christians who are “sojourners” and “exiles” and therefore who don’t have a lot of power in the situation.

Well, it’s tempting to respond in one of several ways when being slandered for following Christ:

1. **Fighting back, verbally or physically.** Defending oneself or even going on the offensive and feeling justified in doing so because of the injustice one has suffered.
2. **Withdrawal, disengagement.** Maintaining a holy, separate society by having as little to do with the surrounding culture as possible.
3. **Acculturation, blending in,** “closeting” one’s true identity as a Christ- follower by adopting or mimicking the culture in which one lives. (Jobes)

Peter’s says “no” to all 3 of tempting these options as strategies for the Christian living in a hostile environment. Peter, instead, calls them to godly engagement with the culture in which they find themselves. For Peter, Jesus Himself is the exemplar of how to be in the world but not of it; how to handle undeserved persecution and suffering.

To live rightly in such a place, Peter gives them a two-pronged strategy:

1. They must **maintain their identity as God’s holy people**---which in turn may cause them to suffer unjustly. They must be prepared for such suffering; but without retaliation.
2. **Their allegiance to God in Christ does not exempt them from submitting to pagan authority**

Peter addresses them as **αγαπητοι**, his deeply beloved! He’s about to ask them to do some very difficult things in the midst of a very tough situation, and he wants them to know that they are loved. Loved certainly by God—He’s just spent the entire opening of the letter demonstrating that; but loved also by Peter!

He addresses them again as “sojourners” and “exiles”—an echo of his intro in chapter 1. Many different kinds of *sojourners and exiles* existed in Roman Empire. Some were slave, some free, some were members of local indigenous ethnic groups, some were native Romans who had been

deported from Rome to colonize other parts of the Roman Empire. (You may recall that when Paul first met Priscilla and Aquila in Corinth, they had only recently come to Corinth, having been expelled from Rome in a general deportation of Jews under Claudius. Acts 18:1) And one's status could change at any time. There was no sense of permanence or security; one's status-- citizen, non-citizen, slave or free, indigenous or exile--- could change at any time. Sounds like some grad students and adjuncts we may know! Lack of security and permanence. Status may change at any time.

The Gk. Word that gets translated "*Exiles*" *Parepideimos* implied that the person lacked citizenship in the land where he was residing. This, in turn, implies a lack of certain rights and privileges.

The Gk. Word that gets translated "*Sojourners*" *Paroikos* means a "resident alien" one who literally "lives alongside" the natives. This is someone who's not quite as new to town as an "exile". This person has lived in this place for some time, and yet still doesn't fully belong.

Abraham uses those 2 exact designations---"sojourner" and "exile"-- to describe himself to the Hittites in (Gen. 23:4.) Peter is deliberately hearkening back to Abraham, and is reminding these believers that they stand in a long line of God's people who were alienated from the cultures in which they lived, whose true citizenship was not in any particular culture or nation. Their true citizenship is in the Kingdom of God.

Brand new GFM staff, brand new Christian graduate students and brand new Christian faculty tend to feel like **exiles** at the university. After we've been around for a while, we may begin to feel like **sojourners**. But if we're true to our identity in Christ, we may never feel fully at home. And so that's how I want us to think about this passage as we unpack it together today.

As Bobby pointed out, Peter addresses his letter to "*The Elect, the exiles of the Diaspora.*" The ELECT of the DIASPORA! "Diaspora" means literally "sown abroad" like seeds in a field, scattered, broadcast. We see the action of the Holy Trinity—in the election and salvation of these believers, but also in the very fact that they find themselves scattered abroad. The Holy Trinity is behind the scattering. He's behind the Diaspora! This scattering is no afterthought on the part of God!

Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote:

*"According to God's will, the Christian church is a scattered people, scattered like seed 'to all the kingdoms of the earth' (Deut. 28:25.) That is the curse and its promise. God's people must live in distant lands among the unbelievers, but they will be the seed of the kingdom of God in all the world."* (Life Together and Prayerbook of the Bible in Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works 5, Fortress, 1996, p. 28)

God turns exile into dispersion—Diaspora, for his own purposes. (Harink) It has been God’s intent at least since the time of Abram that His chosen, wandering, homeless, displaced people should be a blessing to the nations among whom they reside. Remember Jeremiah 29 which we heard Alec exposit for us at national staff conference back in January?

Jeremiah 29: 7 *‘Seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the LORD on its behalf; for in its welfare you will have welfare.’*

Regardless of citizenship, social status or ethnicity, all Christians are **exiles and sojourners/resident aliens** in the fallen world. And as such, we can expect the same lack of understanding or respect for our customs and mores that’s displayed toward foreigners by natives who just don’t get them. All Christians do have citizenship—it just isn’t in Asia Minor or in the Roman Empire or in the U.S.A. or at University X—Our citizenship is in [pause] heaven. *But our citizenship is in heaven, and from it we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ...* (Phil. 3:20-21)

Interesting. *And from it we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ...* We are not waiting to be whisked off to heaven to escape this place, and go to some other place where we will be full-fledged citizens, with all of the rights and privileges pertaining thereto; but we’re awaiting a Savior who will **come from** that place **to us** and transform us even as he transforms the whole creation into a place in which our citizenship is recognized! Peter says in his second epistle, *But according to his promise we are waiting for new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells.* (2 Peter 3:13)

The Apostle John says, *“Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, ‘Behold, the dwelling place of God is with men. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God’.... And the city has no need of sun or moon to shine on it, for the glory of God gives it light, and its lamp is the Lamb. By its light will the nations walk, and **the kings of the earth** will bring **their glory into it...**”* (Rev. 21: 1-3 & 23)

Jesus will set up a New Government in which we will be full-fledged citizens and not alienated strangers. He will retrofit the fallen world to make it fit for us, and retrofit us, His fallen children to make us fit for this new government, His Kingdom. And you notice in Revelation, the nations are still there! But once again, rather than we being made to fit into their cultures, they are redeemed to fit into the New Jerusalem. Our citizenship is in the one government that will **last**.

Someday the true nature of our citizenship will be made public. Someday we'll be vindicated! Someday, we'll never be deported again!

And yet, as Douglas Harink says, “...for Peter, to be exiled means to be vulnerable with the vulnerability of Christ, to live ‘out of control’, to suffer under a foreign power, to long for a homeland...” To be an exile is to not be in charge. Our graduate students know what that feels like! As do many of our untenured faculty. As do we at times. The Apostle Peter is asking us to embrace our alien status in the world and at the university, and live appropriately in that place.

Well, how does one live appropriately in such a place? Peter's first bit of advice to us is “...abstain from the passions of the flesh, which wage war against your soul”

The first and foremost way that we are to live well as resident aliens is to fight hard against our own sin nature! The first and chief danger that Peter addresses is not temptations that arise from the pagan culture, but those that arise in the heart of the believer! Examine your own heart and don't give in to your characteristic “sins of choice.” Abstain from such things. What are these passions of the flesh?

“Carnal desires” certainly implies sexual temptation or other bodily sins like gluttony or drunkenness. But “carnal desires” is so much more than that! “The flesh” in the NT is used to mean our unregenerate, fallen nature.

John Calvin said, *For it is certain that every thought of the flesh, that is, of unrenewed nature, is enmity against God. (Romans 8:7) (Commentaries on the Catholic Epistles, 1509-1564)* So, “The flesh” is absolutely everything in us that is in rebellion against God. It can refer to any unbridled human desire. The desire to be accepted by Greco-Roman society, for example, could certainly be one of those carnal desires that Peter is warning his audience against. In our time, it might be the unbridled desire to have my dissertation topic approved. OR The unbridled desire to win the approval of my colleagues and the big names in my discipline. OR the unbridled desire to plant or build the biggest, baddest GFM chapter the world has ever known!

Fleshly desires can take many shapes and we're all vulnerable in different ways to different things.

One temptation that occurs to many young Christians is to push the limits. Rather than to **abstain** from the passions, they ask the question: How far is too far? How close can I get to the line without going over? When John Wesley was at university he and his friends were just such young believers. They fell into playing silly, casuistic games, so typical among evangelical students. They would ask themselves, “What behaviors are really sinful and which are OK for us

to engage in?" The issue being not so much, how can we keep our way pure, but what can get away with?

So Wesley wrote to his Mom, Susanna Wesley, and put the question to her: "What is sin?" She wrote back.

*"Take this rule: whatever weakens your reasoning, impairs the tenderness of your conscience, obscures your sense of God or takes away your relish for spiritual things; in short, whatever increases the power or authority of the flesh over the Spirit; that thing is sin for you, however good it is in itself."* (letter, June 8, 1725)

How'd you like to have her for a mom?

Peter says **abstain** from such things because these passions of the flesh "wage war" on our souls. John MacArthur said, "...The verb 'wage war' is a very strong term. It's a military term that means to 'carry on a military campaign'... [not] a single skirmish or battle or a one-time attack, it is a long-term campaign....And the term implies not just antagonism, but a continual aggression that is malicious and ongoing and doesn't stop." ("Godly Living," <http://www.gty.org/Resources/Sermons/60-23>)

The passions of the flesh are out to get us, people! We mustn't be naïve in dealing with them. This kind of holiness may not be much in fashion, but it is our calling, Peter says, because it is who we actually are—God's peculiar, holy people and we must live like it. Peter also says it tends to shut mouths.

The kind of self-control that would enable someone to abstain from fleshly passions was a virtue recognized by Greek philosophy and was therefore viewed as a good thing by the Hellenistic society these recipients found themselves in.

By actually practicing their faith, they might silence their critics. And as Miroslav Volf points out, Peter is not simplistic or black and white in his thinking; he sees that there is both good in the culture and bad in the church (Volf, *Soft Difference: Theological Reflections on the Relation between Church and Culture in I Peter*, Ex Auditu, 10:15-30, 1994)

Peter then offers a second bit of advice: **do good things**. Our translation says "keep your conduct among the Gentiles honorable." But the word that gets translated "honorable" is actually *kalos*, [a very rich word, meaning]... lovely, fine, winsome, gracious, fair to look at, noble, excellent and of course, good! It is the purest, highest, noblest kind of goodness. (John MacArthur, [http://jcsn.org/StudyCenter/john\\_macarthur/60-23.htm](http://jcsn.org/StudyCenter/john_macarthur/60-23.htm))

Live lives of resistance to evil by abstaining from bad stuff and by actively doing good stuff. And live these lives publically enough that your pagan neighbors might actually notice! This harkens back to Jesus' teaching: *"Let your light shine before men in such a way that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father who is in heaven."* Matthew 5:16.

The believer's life is mysteriously and inextricably linked with that of Jesus. He is our pattern and example. We "participate" in His life, death and resurrection. There is a certain sense in which when Jesus is baptized in the Jordan, so are we. When he dies on the cross so do we. When he is raised to new life, so are we. When he takes his rightful place in glory, so will we. When he suffers unjustly, so do we. We should expect no less. And Jesus suffered unjustly without sinning. We should strive for no less. Later on in chapter 4 of I Peter, he says: *do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal that has come on you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you. 13 But rejoice inasmuch as you participate in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed.*

But this level of uncertainty and suffering is not usually our experience as believers in North America. Most of us have not lived in a setting in which being Christian lowered social standing, jeopardized jobs or threatened our safety, freedom or life itself. Even our graduate students and untenured faculty who are the most vulnerable typically do not face that kind of overt persecution.

But millions of believers around the world and throughout history have faced and do face the immediate threat of misunderstanding and unjust persecution at the hands of pagan authorities. And wherever Christians are a minority, the message of I Peter takes on new relevance. After WWII, the Christian students at the U of Halle in Soviet dominated East Germany took courage from I Peter. And I Peter is said to be the most popular book of the Bible among Christians in Muslim Indonesia today. (Jobes:21)

You may remember Mary Poplin's talk at NSC '11. She said a lot of really great stuff, but I'm particularly thinking of the words of Pope Benedict that she shared with us. They were from a speech he delivered last spring on how Christians should cope with secularism. Do you remember?

***"Seek dialogue, but be ready for martyrdom."*** That's not actually a direct quote, but it is the title of an article about the speech from the National Catholic Reporter—that's how the reporter summarized the gist of Benedict's message: "Seek dialogue, but be ready for martyrdom." Which is, as it turns out is a fairly good summary in my opinion.

Here's a direct quote: "[Pluralism requires the believer to make] a journey to the core of one's being and to the nucleus of Christianity, so as to reinforce the quality of one's witness to the point of sanctity and to find mission paths that lead even to the radical choice of martyrdom..."  
<http://ncronline.org/blogs/ncr-today/pope-secularism-seek-dialogue-be-ready-martyrdom>

He also said, "...baptism commits Christians to participate boldly in the spread of the Kingdom of God, cooperating if necessary with the sacrifice of one's own life...Certainly not everyone is called to a bloody martyrdom. There is also an unbloody 'martyrdom,' which is no less significant... It is the silent and heroic testimony of many Christians who live the Gospel without compromises ...This martyrdom of ordinary life is a particularly important witness in the secularized societies of our time. It is the peaceful battle of love that all Christians... have to fight tirelessly..." [http://www.catholic.org/international/international\\_story.php?id=25782](http://www.catholic.org/international/international_story.php?id=25782)

Are we sufficiently different in our lifestyle choices and commitment for the secular culture around us to even notice? And if so, are we willing to suffer the consequences which might arise from such cultural antithesis?

Even those not called to the suffering of persecution are called to the suffering of self-denial. Perhaps some of the greatest temptation to sin lies in the avoidance of pain and suffering. Karen Jobes has written:

*"For instance, isn't the temptation to lie often an attempt to save face rather than face the consequences of the truth? Isn't the temptation to cheat on an exam an unwillingness to suffer the loss of reputation or other consequences that failure might bring? Isn't sexual sin often the alternative to suffering by living with deep emotional and physical needs unmet?" (Jobes:24)*

Life is tough and a holy life is really tough! But, according to Peter, the pain and suffering that self-denial brings is a godly suffering that is much better than caving in to sin and may even serve as a good witness.

Peter is saying, "You are visitors here, "guest workers!" So don't unnecessarily offend your host culture, but be prepared for the fact that a faithful Christian life may unintentionally cause offense and may draw hostility."

He commends this "Lifestyle Evangelism" of exemplary, holy lives for 2 reasons:

1. It proves the pagan critiques wrong. The word that gets translated "silence" is the word for "muzzle"!
2. It might actually win some pagans to Christ! They might see our good deeds and glorify God on the day of visitation! (Jobes)



There's an old saying, *If you ask a Mennonite if he is a Christian, he will say, "Ask my neighbor."* Our neighbors should be able to tell! And not by our words, necessarily, but by our lives.

Of course, sadly, the converse is also true. Our failure to live holy lives can give pagans reason to doubt the truth of our story. As I was preparing, I was reminded of a quote from a second century homily:

*When the heathen hear God's oracles on our lips they marvel at their beauty and their greatness. But afterwards, when they mark that our deeds are unworthy of the words we utter, they turn from this to scoffing and say that it is a myth and a delusion.*

*2 Clement 13:3, c. 150 A.D.*

In Jewish thought, the honor or dishonor of God was determined by how outsiders viewed the deeds of His people. This most certainly influenced early Christian thought as well. (Daube, *The New Testament and Rabbinic Judaism*, London: Athlone, 1956)

Peter reminds us that Christ has set us free, but that doesn't mean that we now get to do whatever we want! It simply means that we have a new slave master—Christ Himself. Because we've been set free from sin, we now have the capacity to live a godly life in service to our Lord, whereas before we did not.

Peter advocates respect for governing authorities. At the time Peter wrote, the Emperor was probably either Claudius or Nero! Neither were very good for Christians living in the Roman Empire—but the exhortation remains the same—*Honor the emperor*. As Our Lord taught, "*... love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you.*" (Luke 6)

One of the ways we can help our graduate students and faculty live as resident aliens at the university is to help them to think about how to love their intellectual enemies.

Those us in the faculty catalyst training earlier this week came across a quote from John Howard Yoder:

*"...love of the enemy must include love of the intellectual adversary, including intellectual respect for the holders of the positions one must in conscience reject..."* (*The Royal Priesthood: Essays Ecclesiological and Ecumenical*, Michael G. Cartwright, ed., Eerdmans, 1994, p. 6)

Peter seems to be insisting on complete subjection to the governing authorities which is wise counsel under an authoritarian government. But even this subordination had its limits—even in Peter's thinking. You'll remember that Peter himself disobeyed the authorities. In the book of

Acts, He and John, were commanded *"not to speak or teach at all in the name of Jesus"* (Acts 4:18), and they answered, *"Judge for yourselves whether it is right in God's sight to obey you rather than God. For we cannot help speaking about what we have seen and heard"* (v. 19-20) Later on, the apostles were brought before the high priest, who confronted them and said, *"We gave you strict orders not to teach in this name. Yet you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching and are determined to make us guilty of this man's blood"* (5:28). They answered, *"We must obey God rather than men!"*(v. 29)

It seems that Peter, and Paul for that matter, counsel complete subjection to authoritarian governing authorities—**unless** to submit to that authority would be to disobey God. Then civil disobedience is required of the Christian.

But times change. Eventually, there were Christians who found themselves in positions of authority, who rather than being utterly without rights or influence, had themselves to discharge leadership duties in a godly fashion. Voluntary submission did not exhaust their responsibility to government. They had put the interests and welfare of others ahead of their own, they needed to look to give rather than simply to get, and to serve in addition to being served.

I think that's the case in our contemporary situation. In our governmental situation, which is not a completely authoritarian one—but rather a representative democracy—we have responsibilities toward government other than simple subjection. In our case, government is “of the people, by the people, and for the people”, so that at least in some instances we *are* the govt. What will that mean for us? How will we discharge our duties as citizens when we are both subject to a duly constituted government and responsible governors ourselves? I think we have more responsibility to voice concerns, support good legislation and oppose what we believe to be wrong action, than the first century Christians did because we share in ruling and they (for the most part) did not.

John Stott said, *The authority by which the Christian leader leads is not power, but love; not force, but example; not coercion but reasoned persuasion. Leaders have power, but power is safe only in the hands of those who humble themselves to serve.*

I think this is a good model for the faculty that we work with as well. They often find themselves in positions of authority, leadership and responsibility. Part of our task is encouraging them to not shirk such responsibility but to embrace it as a way of serving God and serving the university. Departmental or university service is often thought of by faculty in the same way many Americans think about jury duty. It's a nuisance! Yes, somebody's gotta do it; but if I can get out of it, you better believe I will!

What if instead we viewed jury duty as a privilege and a responsibility of citizenship in a free society--one of those instances where we should all strive to do our part? What if faculty viewed university service that way? What if they stepped up to do those things that somebody really oughta do, but nobody seems eager to volunteer to do? Such service might be a way of “doing good deeds” among the pagans.

Peter says: “**Honor everyone.**” Well, DUH, you may think. No kidding! Way to state the obvious there, Peter. But, what we may be failing to realize is how radical an idea that actually was in the Greco-Roman world. At the time that Peter was writing, there were approximately **60,000,000 slaves** in the Roman Empire. And not one of them was considered to be a person worthy of honor. Actually, not a one was considered to be a *person*. They were property; they were things. (Barclay)

In our time, it is still all too easy to treat other people as things. Employers can treat employees as human machines that exist to produce so many units of work for the company—or the university. Sometimes we fail to see other people as people. We see them as numbers or projects or interruptions. Whenever we see someone as existing solely to make us more comfortable or to make our lives more convenient, we are treating them as things.

Our grad students can certainly be on the receiving end of such treatment—and certainly the adjuncts are as well. But my guess is that they and we sometimes treat others that way too. What would it mean for us and for our students and faculty to “honor everyone” at the university? And I mean *everyone*. The secretaries? Food service? Building and grounds? Registrars and bursars? Undergrads? TA’s? To actually live out this dictum might be nearly as radical at the contemporary university as it was in the Roman Empire!

Peter says: “**Love the brotherhood.**” Well certainly, treat everyone as a human being, as a person worthy of basic dignity. But LOVE your brothers and sisters! The Church is *family*. We’re called to take even greater pains to care for our fellow believers. Jesus said, “*By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.*” (John 13:35) Once again, our witness, our evangelistic effectiveness depends upon our quality of life! What if our graduate and faculty communities looked like this? What if the university noticed?

Peter says: “**Fear God.**” Those of us in the faculty catalyst training saw in the Proverbs that, “*The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom...*” Some people think that that verse might better be translated, “*The fear of the LORD is principal part of wisdom, the very foundation of wisdom...*” What if our universities saw that in us? In our graduate students and faculty? You see, awe and reverence for God is a prerequisite for respecting people. It’s also a prerequisite for wisdom. Keeping God in His proper place helps us keep others, ourselves and our projects all in their proper places.

Peter says: **“Honor the emperor”** Even if he’s Nero. Even if he’s Barak Obama....or George Bush.... Even if he’s the world’s worst academic dean or she’s the most vicious provost to ever walk the face of the earth, show appropriate honor to the one in charge. You know, to be a resident alien is to *not* be in charge which is tough stuff. Tough for smart, capable folks like us. *Really* tough for graduate students who’ve been told that they’re all that and a bag of chips ever since they were in pre-school. *Really, really* tough for published, tenured faculty with PhD’s from “More-Impressive-than-Your University”. But “Honor the emperor,” anyway, Peter says. “Honor the emperor.”

May God give us grace to live in this way.

#### CHIEF SOURCES

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