

“CHRISTIAN CONDUCT”

I. INTRODUCTION

In the passage we are studying today, we move into a new section in this letter. Here, Peter’s emphasis shifts from who we are to how we should live. These two verses introduce a large section, extending through chapter 3:12, that is concerned with the subject of Christian conduct. These verses provide general instructions for how Christians ought to live, while the sections that follow give specific instructions about our conduct in particular areas of life.

In today’s sermon, I want to focus upon three things that this passage teaches us about Christian conduct. First, it tells us that the basis of our conduct is our identity as a pilgrim people. Second, it says that Christian conduct involves abstaining from fleshly passions. And third, it shows us that Christian conduct involves living honorably in the face of worldly opposition.

II. THE BASIS OF OUR CONDUCT IS OUR IDENTITY AS A PILGRIM PEOPLE

We begin with the first point: the basis of our conduct is our identity as a pilgrim people. Peter bases his exhortation upon the fact that we live in this world as sojourners and exiles. This is a repeated theme in 1 Peter. The letter is addressed to those “who are elect exiles of the dispersion,” and in 1:17 our entire life in this world is described as a time of “exile.” This theme is also repeated throughout the Scriptures. In the book of Genesis, Abraham referred to himself as a sojourner in the land of the Hittites (Gen. 23:4). The writer of the letter to the Hebrews said that Abraham and his descendants died in faith, seeking a heavenly country, living as strangers and exiles on the earth (see Heb. 11:13-16). And in Psalm 119 the psalmist prays, “I am a sojourner on the earth.” (Ps. 119:19). The Scriptures make it very clear: we live in this world as sojourners, or pilgrims. This is a central aspect of our identity as the covenant people of God. Like Christian in Bunyan’s classic allegory *The Pilgrim’s Progress*, we are going through this world on a journey towards the Celestial City. The Lord has called us out from the midst of this world, so that we might be a people for his own possession. For as long as we live in this world, we are guests, temporary residents. Our true country, our true home, is in heaven.

However, this does not mean that we should entirely withdraw from the world. To be sure, there are senses in which we need to distance ourselves from the world. But we also need to remember that we are, after all, pilgrims, and that we will be pilgrims for all our days on this earth. This is why Jesus prayed for his followers saying: “I do not ask

that you take them out of the world, but that you keep them from the evil one. They are not of the world, just as I am not of the world. Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth. As you sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world.” Jesus does not call us to withdraw from the world, but to live in the world as his holy people. We are called to live in this world, but we do so as citizens of heaven, not as citizens of the world. And this means that our conduct in the world is to be governed by the statutes of our heavenly home.

Let me illustrate this. When I was a boy, I had a friend named Pietro. As you can probably guess, Pietro was Italian. And when you went over Pietro’s house, there was a sense in which it was like entering into another world. The décor was different. There was always a delicious, garlicky smell in the air. There would often be racks of homemade pasta drying on the kitchen counter. Pietro’s mother and his grandmother, who lived with them, spoke only in Italian, while his father spoke English with a very thick accent. There was no mistaking the fact that Pietro’s family was different. Their life, their home, was more reflective of Italian culture than American culture.

This is a picture of what a Christian’s life should be like. We should be different from the people of this world. Our life should be reflective of our heavenly citizenship. Our ways of speaking, our patterns of living, our overall conduct should stand out as different, in much the same way that a foreign accent stands out as different. I ask you today: Is this

difference evident in your life? Does your life bear a heavenly accent? Or have you picked up a worldly drawl? Is your family life, your work, your relationships, your priorities, your use of money and time – are these things reflective of your heavenly citizenship? Or do they look essentially the same as those who live as citizens of this world? Brothers and sisters, remember who you are. Remember to whose kingdom you belong. Do not live in a manner that suggests that you would rather live here than in your true home. Live as a sojourner, an exile, a pilgrim. In all that you do in your life, always keep your destination in view. Live with heaven always in your sights.

III. CHRISTIAN CONDUCT INVOLVES ABSTAINING FROM FLESHLY PASSIONS

Now to our second point: Christian conduct involves abstaining from fleshly passions. Peter is talking here about the lifelong conflict that every Christian has with indwelling sin. As Christians, we have been set free from the condemning power of sin. The blood of Christ cleanses us from the guilt of sin, and there is no more condemnation for us. Through faith in Christ, we are declared righteous in God's sight. However, we still have to contend with the power of indwelling sin. As the apostle Paul wrote, we know the good that we ought to do, but we so often fail to do it. And instead, we do the evil that we ought not do. This is true for every Christian, from the least to the greatest. As Thomas Watson says, "There are more dregs than spirit in the best heart. The heart

swims in sin.” (*A Godly Man’s Picture*, p. 234) Every Christian knows this by personal experience. And if anyone would deny it, then that person neither knows himself nor the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Peter says that the passions of the flesh wage war against your soul. The Christian life is a life of constant warfare with the flesh. Your conflict with indwelling sin is not won in a single battle. It is a lifelong war. For as long as you live, you will always have it within you to deny Christ and betray Christ at every turn. If you would be holy, you must put up a fight; you are called to the fight of faith. The sin that still dwells within you is constantly seeking to destroy you. Do not give in to it. Do not surrender. Keep on fighting. Put it to death day by day, moment by moment. This is what theologians refer to as the mortification of sin. Listen to the great John Owen, urging his readers to put sin to death: “Do you mortify; do you make it your daily work; be always at it while you live; cease not a day from this work; be killing sin or it will be killing you.” (*Overcoming Sin and Temptation*, p. 50) We need to habitually weaken the power of indwelling sin by constantly warring against it by the power of the Holy Spirit.

And that last phrase is the key: by the power of the Holy Spirit. This is what Paul teaches in Romans 8:13: “For if you live according to the flesh you will die, but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live.” Do not attempt to fight against sin in your own strength. Do not attempt to abstain from the passions of the flesh

by mere will-power. Fight against sin with all of your might, but do so by looking to the Spirit of God to bring the sin-killing power of the cross into your heart. In ourselves, we are thoroughly corrupted by sin. We do not have any of our own resources to employ in the fight against sin. And this should cause us to be both humble and watchful. Listen to the words of Augustine: “Let no man flatter himself; of himself he is Satan. His blessing comes from God alone. For what do you have of your own but sin?” (cited in Calvin’s *Institutes*, 2.2.11) Fight against sin, but do so in utter reliance upon the Spirit of God.

Every one in this room has a heart filled with fleshly passions which are waging war against his or her soul. Some of you are fighting for your life. You know that you must be killing sin, or it will be killing you. If this is the case for you, then do not grow weary; keep on fighting; fight in the power of the Holy Spirit; fight with the certain hope that God gives you the victory through the Lord Jesus Christ.

But there are others here who may not be experiencing the warfare that I am talking about. Perhaps you are even offended to hear Augustine say that you have nothing of your own but sin. Perhaps you think that it is a bit much to say that there is something within you that is always waging war against your soul. If this is the case for you, if you cannot relate to the idea that the Christian life is a life of constant warfare against the flesh, then there is a good reason why. It is not because you do not have these fleshly passions within you. It is because you are not putting up a fight against them. The

reason why you do not feel them warring against your soul is because they are already holding your soul captive. To you I say this: look to Christ; ask him to bring the sin-killing power of the cross into your heart. Remember, if you are not killing sin, then it will be killing you!

IV. CHRISTIAN CONDUCT INVOLVES LIVING HONORABLY IN THE FACE OF WORLDLY OPPOSITION

And now to our third point: Christian conduct involves living honorably in the face of worldly opposition. We should not be surprised to find that the world stands opposed to us as Christians. As Jesus said to his disciples, “If you were of the world, the world would love you as its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you.” (Jn. 15:19) As we look across the pages of church history, we can see Jesus’ words being fulfilled. The world hated the church in its first few centuries, when Christians were accused of various evils, including disloyalty to the emperor, conducting unlawful customs, defaming pagan gods, and generally stirring up trouble. The world hated the church in the late middle ages, when those who were calling for the reform of the church were persecuted and put to death. And the world continues to hate the church today, when those who wish to remain faithful to the Bible are often regarded as arrogant and intolerant.

We should not be surprised at this. But we must not respond to the world's hatred in a hateful way. Let the world call us intolerant, but let us be the people who really love all people, especially our enemies. Let the world call us arrogant, but let us be the people who are truly humbled by our sin. Let there be no charge of hypocrisy against us. Let us live honorable lives among the peoples of this world. Let us be the best citizens, the best parents, the best children, the best neighbors, the best employers, and the best employees. Conduct your life in this world in a manner that testifies to the fact that you do not belong to this world. When you do that, some will speak against you as an evildoer. But some will see your good deeds, and they will give glory to God.

V. CONCLUSION

As Christians, our conduct in this world is determined by the fact that our citizenship is in heaven. Do not buy into the false notion that it is possible to be so heavenly-minded that you are of no earthly good. The exact opposite is true. It is the truly heavenly-minded person who will make the greatest impact during the time of his pilgrimage through this world. In the words of C.S. Lewis: "If you read history you will find that the Christians who did most for the present world were precisely those who thought most of the next. It is since Christians have largely ceased to think of the other world that they have become so ineffective in this."

Sermon on 1 Peter 2:11-12
OT Reading: Psalm 119:17-24

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