

## ***A Life of Integrity***

1 Peter 2:11-12

All of us want to live lives of integrity, don't we? We all want our private and our public lives to match. We want our behavior to be consistent with what we believe. We want a consistent, integrated life. None of us thinks, "I want the shame and guilt associated with an inconsistent, hypocritical life."

Today's passage, 1 Peter 2:11-12, describes a life of integrity. Peter will give commands, one negative and one positive, concerning our internal desires and our external behavior. Peter will give us a vision for a consistent, integrated life. Peter will explain that this life of integrity puts us in a position to influence people for Christ. A life of integrity is a life that God can use in powerful ways.

Peter tells us that a life of integrity involves two things. First, A life of integrity means "abstaining from the passions of the flesh."

***Indulging the passions of the flesh will compromise our lives. (1 Peter 2:11)***

Notice in verse 11 that Peter is speaking out of his affection for his readers.

11 Beloved, I urge you as sojourners and exiles to abstain from the passions of the flesh, which wage war against your soul.

Peter addresses his readers as "beloved" eight times in 1 and 2 Peter. He is signaling that the things he is commanding flow from his love for them as an apostle (1 Peter 1:1) and a pastor/shepherd (1 Peter 5:1). In essence Peter is saying, "Because I love you, I am urging you to live in a way that's consistent with your identity."

Peter appeals to their identity as "sojourners and exiles." The first term, sojourners, reminded the believers in Asia Minor that they were like Abraham, called by God to sojourn in a land that wasn't their home and to live among people who didn't share their relationship with God. The second term, exiles, reminded them that they were like Daniel, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-nego living as exiles in Babylon. Just like Jews living in Babylon were commanded not to worship the gods of the Babylonians, Peter urges believers in Jesus "to abstain from the passions of the flesh." Indulging such passions was incompatible with their citizenship in heaven.

The term translated "passion" isn't always a reference to sinful desires. In Philippians 1:23, for example, Paul wrote, "My desire/passion is to depart and be with Christ." It simply means a strong desire. Here in 1 Peter 2:11, Peter is obviously referring to a sinful desires when he writes "abstain from passions *of the flesh*." He is referring to those sinful cravings that are contrary to the will of God and to our identity as the people of God.

Peter uses this term in chapter 4 when he writes:

1 Since therefore Christ suffered in the flesh, arm yourselves with the same way of thinking, for whoever has suffered in the flesh has ceased from sin, 2 so as to live for the rest of the time in the flesh no longer for human passions but for the will of God. 3 For the time that is past suffices for doing what the Gentiles want to do, living in sensuality, passions, drunkenness, orgies, drinking parties, and lawless idolatry.

Peter says, “Before coming to Christ you had plenty of time to indulge fleshly passions like the Gentiles [everybody else in the dominant culture around you]. But now that you are followers of Christ, you should abandon those passion and live ‘for the will of God.’” The “passions of the flesh” would include sexual sins, but would refer to anything contrary to the will of God.

11 Beloved, I urge you as sojourners and exiles to abstain from the passions of the flesh, which wage war against your soul.

Why is Peter so black and white about the passions of the flesh? Why doesn't he say to avoid them as much as possible or to cut back whenever you can? Why does he say to abstain from the passions of the flesh? Because they “**wage war against your soul.**” He uses the imagery of warfare to stress that indulging the flesh is **spiritually dangerous**; it damages your very soul, which is the most valuable thing God has entrusted to you. This is true whether you're indulging in sensuality or revenge or grumbling or materialism or anger. Indulging the passion of the flesh will sabotage our walks with God and our fellowship with others; it will dull our spiritual senses and our desire to love God with our heart, soul, and strength; it will leave us lethargic and apathetic. Some people abandon the faith because the passions of the flesh seem more real than God.

We're probably in a number of different places when it comes to obeying this command. Some of you are essentially obeying this command; not perfectly, but you are experiencing freedom from enslaving passions of the flesh. Others are in the midst of this battle; every day or week you are feel the war against your soul. As a follower of Christ your deepest desire is to be able to obey this command to abstain from fleshly lusts. Others of you are probably thinking, “Why in the world would I voluntarily abstain from the most pleasurable thing in my life right now?”

Wherever you are this morning, let me first remind you that Peter gives this command out of his affection for these believers (he calls them “beloved”). “Because I love you, I command you to abstain from the passion of the flesh that compromise your experience of God Himself.” I would also remind you that God's power is available to obey this command. God always provides a way for us to obey what He commands. Our salvation provides everything we need “for life and godliness” (2 Peter 1). Jesus told the Samaritan woman that whoever “drinks of the water that I will give him shall never thirst”; in other words Jesus is so satisfying that our thirst for lesser things fades away. Paul wrote in Galatians 5, “Walk by the Spirit and you will not carry out the desire of the flesh.”

Second, a life of integrity involves behavior that reflects our citizenship in heaven.

***Our good behavior has the potential of influencing others for Christ. (1 Peter 2:12)***

12 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.

Earlier in his letter, Peter challenged his readers to consider that their heavenly Father was watching their behavior. But God is not the only One watching our behavior. People outside the church are watching also. Peter writes that we should “keep our **conduct** among the Gentiles honorable.” Remember that the dominant motif running through 1 Peter is that of living in exile. Just as the Jewish people lived among Gentiles (i.e., non-Jews) in Babylon, Christians are living in exile among people who don’t yet know Christ. As we live among people w/o Christ, we are keep our conduct honorable (or excellent; Peter uses the common word for “good”).

Ironically, the Jewish nation was more obedient and effective as “a light to the Gentiles” while in exile than when they dwelt securely in the Promised Land. They were largely complacent and careless when they had abundance in the Land; they were vigilant and purposeful while in exile. Their example in exile serves as a paradigm for us. We see this very clearly in the lives of Daniel, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-nego.

On the one hand, they were vilified as evildoers because they would worship only YHWH. At one point Nebuchadnezzar had Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-nego thrown into the fiery furnace because they wouldn’t fall down and worship his image. Daniel was thrown into the lion’s den for praying to YHWH three times a day. In both cases God protected and rescued these young men. The point is that their faith in God was offensive to the dominant culture in Babylon.

On the other hand they excelled physically and academically. Because of the power of their lives (their wisdom and their spiritual gifts such as interpreting dreams) they were promoted to positions of influence in Nebuchadnezzar’s government. Because they refused to defile themselves and because they kept their behavior excellent among the Babylonians, God used them in powerful ways. Nebuchadnezzar ended up praising the God of Israel because of their faithful presence in his government.

12 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.

Here in verse 12 Peter advocates the very same perspective for Christians who are living in and among people w/o Christ. On the one hand, Peter acknowledges that unbelievers will sometimes “speak against you as evildoers.” As we’ve mentioned before, it is possible that some of Peter’s original readers had literally been exiled from Rome and resettled in Asia Minor. If so they would have been viewed as outsiders and foreigners; they likely would have been viewed with suspicion as people who reject their way of living and disrupt their way of life.

Christians were sometimes accused of being anti-social or even atheist because they didn't worship the gods of the dominant culture. And in our day people "speak against us as evildoers" for various reasons. Of course, sometimes people have legitimate critiques of the church; we misrepresent Christ sometimes. And when we do we should admit as much and repent.

But many times people slander us for simply believing what the Scriptures to teach. A biblical view of human sexuality, for example, often brings accusations of being narrow-minded and bigoted. Our commitment to take the gospel to the ends of the earth is sometimes met with the charge that we want to force our religion on people who are otherwise happy and fulfilled. Peter will instruct us later in the chapter to follow Christ's example when people revile us. On the one hand, sometimes people will speak against us as evildoers.

On the other hand, there is the possibility that they may "see your good deeds" and be so persuaded that they will "glorify God on the day of visitation" (when Christ "visits" us again at His return). In other words, there is overlap between the values of believers and society at large; basic Christian virtues are respected and appreciated by almost everyone. Peter is saying that there should be something about our behavior that is winsome and persuasive. Karen Jobes makes this observation (*1 Peter*, p. 170):

"The implication of this overlap is that Peter does not seem to be thinking in binary categories that characterize society as evil and the Christian community as good."

Binary thinking is the mindset, "Christians are good; everyone and everything else is bad." That simply isn't true, and that mindset unnecessarily creates distance between us and people who need Christ. In fact, people all around us value and respect many of the same things that we do. James said that "pure and undefiled religion" in the sight of our Father is to "visit orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world." Interestingly, James urges the same integrity we've been discussing this morning: keeping ourselves unstained by the world (similar to "abstaining from fleshly passions") and visiting orphans and widows (excellent behavior).

In Matthew 5:16 Jesus taught that we should live transparent lives, letting others see our behavior.

16 In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven.

The presupposition of this command is that we will do good works; that's a given. He is basically saying that when we live transparent lives others will see our good works/behavior. And some of those people will be so persuaded by our discipleship that they "give glory to our Father in heaven." Motivation is important here. We don't do good works just to impress people. If we do that, Jesus said, we forfeit any reward from God (Matthew 6). We do good works because we're followers of Jesus. We do good works

because we are moved to compassion for others. James makes a similar point James 3:13.

13 Who is wise and understanding among you? By his good conduct let him show his works in the meekness of wisdom.

You don't prove that you're wise and understanding by your words; telling somebody, "I'm a really, really wise person," isn't very persuasive. You prove that you're wise and understanding by your "good conduct"; you persuade people by your works done in the gentleness of wisdom.

The possibility that Peter held out was that "they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day of visitation." Some will be persuaded and will enter the kingdom!

**Examples.** This past week I asked a number of people here at Faith to share their experiences with today's passage. Specifically I wanted them to share examples of how unbelievers appreciate and respect the good works they do (whether in the home, the workplace, or their neighborhoods). What I heard was fascinating.

One businessman told me that his customers (whether believers or not) respected him because, "I did what I said I would do, even if it costed me money." He said that many people just expect you to break your word if it's to your advantage. So it was striking to people when he kept his word even when it cost him. That type of honesty and integrity is striking.

Another person mentioned a family member who has chosen a very different life than the rest of the family. This family member knows that the rest of the family doesn't agree with her lifestyle, but there is no doubt that they love and accept her. They have stayed in relationship and have extended grace very consistently.

I talked to a couple of people whose clients/customers know that they are Christians. This openness about their faith has provided opportunities to share biblical perspectives. During financial downturns, one man who is a financial advisor had the opportunity to encourage clients to trust in God, not in money. Another was able to share with a customer who was experiencing a good deal of anxiety what Jesus taught in Matthew 6: since God feeds the birds and clothes the flowers, surely He will take care of His people. These opportunities to speak about Christ were the byproduct of doing their work honorably, unto the Lord.

Our works and our words go together. Most often our works are our first witness, and our words come later. In 1 Peter 3 (verse 15) Peter will write that we need to be "ready to make a defense to everyone who asks you to give an account for the hope that is in you, yet with gentleness and reverence." If we keep our conduct honorable" and people "see our good works," some people will eventually ask, "What is the deal with you? Why do you live the way you do?" They are basically saying, "Your behavior is sending a message loud and clear; now I'd like to hear that message in words." We share the gospel in words and deeds.

Another person told me that one of her unbelieving friends asked her (sort of out of the blue), “Where do you go to church?” “Why do you ask?” “When I see you and your husband together, I want what you have.” Specifically this person had noticed how they apologize to each other and forgive each other; this friend and her husband had hurt each other deeply but never really forgave each other. Forgiveness is a distinctively Christian virtue. In Ephesians 4:32 Paul said, “Forgiving each another just as God in Christ also has forgiven you.” It’s a striking thing to tell someone else, “You’ve offended me, but I’m never going to make you pay for it. Why? Because I’ve sinned against God and because of Christ He’s never going to make me pay for my sin.” That type of behavior is a powerful apologetic for our faith.

I hope that the vision of 1 Peter 2:10 and 11 is compelling to you. Peter is giving us a vision for a life of integrity: our internal and external lives are consistent; our behavior matches our beliefs. That integrity puts us in a position to be used by God to influence others for Christ. And that is a **great** privilege.