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Scripture Text: 1 Peter 2:11-25

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Manuscript written by Roger Roberts and

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For information regarding this manuscript, contact the author at Roger.Roberts@ibcbrussels.org.

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Winsome Living in a Godless World

Introduction:

Open your Bibles with me to I Peter 2:11-25, as we continue to look at this letter of Simon Peter, the “Apostle of Hope,” who writes to encourage the faith and hope of a church scattered throughout Asia Minor, and facing an increasing amount of difficulty and persecution. We have noted in the previous section of this epistle what Peter has written about our living hope (1:1-9), about our calling to be his obedient children (1:13-2:3) and his call to the church as his chosen and holy people, who declare his praises in a culture of spiritual darkness (2:4-10).

We have already noted that the church is to think of itself as a people in exile, as foreigners in this fallen world, and on pilgrimage to the eternal heavenly City of God (1:1, 17). In all likelihood, these whom Peter addresses are Christians who were made to be literal exiles, sent by order of Caesar to occupy the remotest regions of Asia Minor (modern day Turkey). Whatever the historical setting, the truth remains that as God’s children we are spiritual exiles and are to regard ourselves as foreigners and strangers in this fallen world. In our text for today we enter the heart of Peter’s message, wherein he gives

encouragement and guidelines on how to live faithfully as strangers and foreigners in our temporary host culture.

Follow as I read **1 Peter 2:11-25**.

I have a rather odd optimism for the spread of the Gospel of Christ in this post-Christian culture. It's odd because it seems to defy all the evidence, such as the fact that a fraction of 1% of the population of Belgium is regarded as evangelical. But my odd optimism is based on the fact of history, especially the history of the earliest church, which was the church addressed and led by the apostles, including Paul and Simon Peter.

It seems that the majority of evangelical and other believers in various denominations in this part of the world are aware of our absolute dependence on the Lord, not only for the spread of the Gospel but for grace to live faithfully as Christ's followers. We're conscious of our minority status, and thus must depend on the power of the Holy Spirit to keep us faithful and to use us in his service. Many of you face the challenge of living faithfully in your daily lives, with employers and colleagues at work who either know or care nothing about your faith or who even openly reject and ridicule and socially ostracize you. You may be native Belgians, but as a follower of Jesus you are a stranger and foreigner in the unbelieving culture where you live and work.

I also believe God is glorified, not in the efforts of well-endowed churches where professing Christians are the majority, but rather through small churches with believers with great faith. This environment is not dissimilar to that in 1st Century Asia Minor, with the scattered people whom God used in a great way to launch the spread of the Gospel in a hostile, pagan, antagonistic and even dangerous world. And even today, the Gospel is spreading fastest in the unlikeliest places, such as China and throughout Southern Asia, South America and Africa. Secularity, opposition and even persecution are not a threat to the church; rather, the church grows amidst persecution because the witness, prayers and faith of God's people are stronger and more fervent.

Difficult circumstances, however, must be met by the faith of faithful followers of Jesus. Difficulties and suffering don't always result in stronger believers and churches. As the Book of Hebrews warns, fearful nominal believers are likely to fall away from their profession of faith. There are two tendencies in the face of suffering unjustly—to resist opposition with human efforts or retreat, to privatize one's faith and become secret, "closet Christians" (Jobes, 165). Peter warns against both and as he moves into the heart of this letter, he instructs and encourages us toward winsome living in a Godless world, and this living involves an...

Effective strategy (verses 11-12)

Peter doesn't give some outline or directives for a program of outreach and evangelism, as important as those can be. Programs for outreach evangelism

such as we use here at IBC are dependent on the more fundamental strategy Peter gives in verses 11 & 12, which is...

Living as strangers in the world

Peter reminds us throughout his letter, and again in this 11th verse, that we are aliens and strangers in this world in a spiritual sense, just as these believers scattered throughout the Roman Empire were literally aliens and strangers. What Peter is admonishing is that we live as winsome aliens and foreigners, as guests of the host country, and not as belligerent, demanding invaders.

As people of God we have been, since the beginning, called to live as sojourners in a setting that is alien to us. Abraham, the father of all who believe, recognized himself to be an alien and stranger in Canaan (Genesis 23:4). Because we are God's chosen people and citizens of God's holy nation (literally, race, 1 Peter 2:9), we regard ourselves as not totally at home in this fallen world. We cannot expect to be "insiders," but are necessarily regarded as outsiders to the culture of unbelief.

We are not to be a belligerent annoyance to the world around us; but our strategy is to be living as strangers and...

Abstaining from the influence of the world

One of the saddest commentaries about the evangelical church in the US, my home country, is that the moral and ethical lives of professing Christians are not much different from the lives of unbelievers. We have not heeded the words of Paul to be separate from the world morally (2 Corinthians 6:17) nor have we answered Jesus' prayer that we are to be in the world and yet not of it (John 17:15ff).

We have noted that Peter urges us to be holy as God is holy, and to fulfill the purpose of our salvation, which is to reflect and to glorify Christ by projecting his image to the unbelieving world (1:15). We have noted that we are, as children of God, to resemble him as living stones are "chips off the Block," the Living Stone, Christ (2:5, 9). But before we can bear his likeness in positive holiness and righteous, godly living, we must be rid of those sinful things that war against our souls (2:11). These sinful desires is not just the unbridled, self-centered indulgence of our sexual or materialistic appetites but also would include any attitude, thought or action that is dishonoring and displeasing to God, such as selfish ambition, sinful pride, envy jealousy and other sins of the spirit. All that is not pleasing to God wars against the soul, and makes us less than fully human as God intended us and Christ rescued us to be (11).

The Greek has two words for "good," one that means good within itself (agathos), intrinsically good, and one that means good especially in appearance (kalos), "winsome and attractive" (Robertson, 100; Barclay, 239). And here Peter says our lives are to so godly and like Christ that they will look good in the eyes of the world.

The strategy for winsome living...

Resulting in conversions out of the world

Peter says that the strategy to winning the unconverted, of recruiting worshipers around God's throne who will some great Day glorify God (12), is to live godly, Christ-honoring and reflecting lives. This is the most effective strategy because the world is watching your life before it will hear your message. It's true that people watch strangers more closely (Jobes, 171).

Week before last, we enjoyed hosting Nancy's sister and brother-in-law as our guests for a week in Belgium. We enjoyed a meal in a restaurant in a small village in the Ardennes, and people at the tables to either side of us seemed to be very interested in us, listening to our strange-sounding language, and seemingly wondering what spaceship we descended from. These observers virtually ignored the other customers, who were locals just like they were, but they were very interested in us.

So were the believers exiled in Asia Minor being watched closely, as we are here in this place. And this is the strategy Jesus also gives in his Sermon on the Mount, that we let our light shine before others so that they might see our good deeds and praise the Father in heaven (Matthew 5:16).

The Apostle Paul understood the importance of being before doing in his evangelism. He sought to relate to both the religious (Jews) and the secular pagans in a way that would give him a hearing for the Gospel. He said, "I have become all things to all men so that by all possible means I might save some" (1 Corinthians 9:22).

Although we are aliens and strangers, we are being watched closely, and Peter says that if we live godly lives of love. Even though we may momentarily be falsely accused, the strategy of godly living will succeed. As one has observed, the idea Peter presents is that pagans will continuously observe the good works of believers and perhaps God will grant repentance unto life (Blum, 232). On the Day God visits us, the great Day of the Lord, when Christ will appear and summon us all before his judgment seat, those who were watching our lives may well have come to faith in Jesus. We will have made, even in some cases unwittingly, followers of Jesus who will join us around the throne, glorifying God (12).

We cannot know the effect of our witness in this life, since we cannot always see the fruit of conversions, some of which may take place after we are gone. But godly living is the most effective strategy. It doesn't preclude our responsibility to share the Gospel verbally, but godliness is a prerequisite. What damage is done to the witness of the Gospel by those who profess to be believers, and even ministers of the Gospel, whose lives bring disgrace to the church and damage to our mission!

Winsome living does not take place only on a personal level. Peter next says that we must relate to society in a winsome way, through our...

Willing submission (verses 13-17)

Most biblical scholars that I have read calculate that this letter was written by Peter during the early part of the brutal reign of Emperor Nero, who intensified persecution against the church (Burdick, 1891, Wheaton, 1242). Some commentators say that this may have been during the closing years of Claudius' reign, and right before the rule of Nero (Jobes, 176, Moo, 2126). In any case, the church was facing mounting persecution, yet Peter says that if they want to live winsomely they must have...

Respect for authority

Jesus taught us, along with his disciples, to give to Caesar (i.e. government), what belongs to government and to God what belongs to him (Matthew 22:21). Paul explains that temporal governments are actually given by God for the stability of society and that believers are to obey the civil laws and pay taxes that are due to the government (Romans 13:1-7).

And in our text Peter says we are to respect the authorities and the laws of the land, knowing they are given to us/sent by God himself for the well being of society (13f). Peter knew the importance of the exiled church in respecting the governments and authorities where they were living as guests, as newcomers, as aliens and strangers. These new immigrants were viewed closely and also with great suspicion. Rumors abounded about these followers of one called the Christ, and these rumors escalated to the point where Christians were regarded as dangerous and subversive to the established government and societal order (Jobes, 175ff).

An important part of our winsome living is to show that we are not dangerously subversive but rather are willingly submissive to authorities, believing they are given us by God for the good of society and that we are living as guests in this fallen world. So, as far as is possible, lets be good guests!

Of course, as was true in Jerusalem in the earliest church, and as became true eventually under Nero's brutal reign, the day may come when we, like the apostles who suffered persecution for their witness, must obey God rather than man (Acts 5:29). And we know there are many believers throughout the world who are making this choice to be faithful to Christ at the cost of suffering and even unto death as Christ's martyrs.

But here in this country, people here, including law enforcement officers, must see that we who follow Jesus respect their authority and appreciate their service to us and we are not exempt from the laws of the land, but must set a good example, even by the way we drive our automobiles. Our freedom in Christ does not exempt us from obedience to rules, regulations and laws.

A minister colleague of my father's in Ohio, USA, was caught speeding and was stopped by a policeman, who proceeded to write him a ticket, which meant

the speeding minister would have to pay a fine. The minister engaged the policeman in a spiritual conversation, presenting to him an abbreviated Gospel message. Following the minister's directions, the patrolman reverently bowed his head and prayed a prayer of repentance and agreed to follow Jesus as Lord. The minister rejoiced to think this policeman had become a convert to Christ and thought that perhaps this newly converted policeman would change his mind about the ticket and kindly overlook the minister's speeding violation. But the converted policeman demonstrated more saving grace than did the zealously evangelistic minister. He continued to write the speeding ticket the minister would have to pay, saying that now that he was a follower of Jesus, it was important that he do his duty to control unlawful speeding, and he was sure the minister would agree with him! The lead-footed minister learned a lesson about respecting God-given authority.

Peter reminds us that Christian freedom doesn't mean license to disregard authorities (16) and says in verse 17 we are to have...

Regard for everyone

Peter summarizes this section by saying we need to show proper respect to everyone (17). We are of course to especially love our fellow believers, which is the way the world will know we belong to Jesus (John 13:35). We must fear the Lord with a reverence for him that does away with the need to fear anyone else, including those who can destroy us physically (Matthew 10:28). And we are to honor the king (17), and command that must have been challenging to those feeling like victims of a ruthless dictator.

To show this "proper respect to everyone" demands the love of Christ in us and pouring from us to others, including our enemies (Matthew 5:43ff). What we must do is realize that, regardless of how wicked or ruthless or how much against us, everyone is created in the image of God and is a candidate for the grace of God. And we can live in submission to authorities over us, realizing God has given them to us for our good and that Christ Jesus himself is over all authorities and powers (Matthew 28:18)

The Apostle Paul recounts the work of grace in his life, as he calls himself the chief of sinners, whose conversion from a life of ruthless persecution of the church to a missionary leader of the church is a testimony of the power of God (1 Timothy 1:12ff). Paul says his conversion is "Exhibit A" of the transforming power of Christ. Because Christ Jesus rescued him when he was an enemy of the Cross, he can and will redeem and transform anyone whom he will. That includes the unlikeliest person you can imagine.

At the heart of our living winsomely in a pagan world is the love, the unconditional love that we are to have for others, including our enemies. Love is the most Christ-like of the virtues and will speak the loudest to our enemies.

As we see in the next section (18-25), winsome living includes also...

Faithful suffering (verses 18-25)

Peter next tells us that our lives are winsome, that we will indeed “win some” (1 Corinthians 9:22), if we endure faithful suffering. The churches throughout Asia Minor no doubt included slaves, since there were as many as 60 million of them in the Roman Empire. Some slaves were professionals, such as doctors, teachers, musicians and actors in the theater, while others were domestics and laborers (Barclay, 249). They might be treated with kindness and generosity, as a beloved member of the family, or they might be treated harshly and with brutality. But always slaves were the most vulnerable members of society and at the complete mercy of their owners.

Even though not all the believers were slaves, Peter nevertheless uses them as a paradigm for all believers (Jobes, 180). What Peter says to slaves he says to us all. We are to think of ourselves as slaves, as servants of God, but also we are to think of Christ Jesus as the ultimate servant and slave of God, who also became to serve us (Jobes, 187, Mark 10:45). Although Peter doesn’t speak against the institution in this context, where his message is one of willing submission to the cultural institution of slavery, he nevertheless, as does Paul, lays the groundwork for the abolition of slavery (Burdick, 1891).

Just as we might do when Paul addresses the believer’s behavior in his “household code of conduct” (Ephesians 6:5-9), today we can to some extent apply what Peter also says about slaves and masters to employees and employers. Hopefully, most of you employees are not subjected to the treatment of a slave, and you employers don’t subject your employees to cruel or even unfair treatment.

Peter says that when believing slaves (read “employees”) are mistreated, they are bear up under the pain of unjust suffering because when they do so they are...

Aware of the presence of God

In verse 19 Peter speaks of our being “conscious of God” (“mindful of God,” ESV). This is a key to our living winsomely in a Godless world. When we realize and practice the presence of our all-wise, all-powerful and all-loving God, we are able to find peace and rest in him. We then understand that he is in control of our lives and even of the lives of our enemies and of any evil that might threaten us.

There’s no better example of this awareness of God than in the lives of the three young men living as exiles in Babylon. Because Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego refused to bow down to the image of gold, they were sentenced to die in the fiery furnace. They replied to the furious king that their God was able to deliver them, and if he chose not to give them physical deliverance, they would not bow down to the king’s image regardless. The Lord God did deliver them and even the king witnessed the presence of a fourth person with them in the furnace, which was the Lord or his angel (Daniel 3).

Several times in his ministry, especially during crises points, the Lord revealed himself to the Apostle Paul in order to give him special encouragement (Acts 18:9f; 23:11; 27:23f).

We too need to seek the encouragement God gives us through his word and by the Holy Spirit's speaking to our hearts, reminding us of God's promises and his protection and his providential care and direction in all of our circumstances, even when treated unfairly, unjustly or even cruelly. When we know God is with us, we have the assurance of his sufficient grace (2 Corinthians 12:9) and know our circumstances are ordered by our sovereign God for our everlasting good and for his glory (Romans 8:28).

In fact, when we are aware of the presence of God in our lives, we know we are sharing in the fellowship of his sufferings and being conformed more to Christ's image (Philippians 3:10). And this gives us surprising joy, because we are then...

Following the pattern of Christ

After receiving a flogging ordered by the Sanhedrin, the apostles left "rejoicing because they had been counted worthy of suffering disgrace for the Name" (Acts 5:41). Winsome lives are joy-filled lives because they realize God is at work through them and is being revealed and glorified through them. Our Lord Jesus could approach the Cross with confidence that great joy awaited him, the joy of his resurrection and exaltation (Hebrews 12:2).

God reveals himself, not through our good, pleasant circumstances, but rather through our suffering for the sake of Christ. Christ revealed God to us supremely through his suffering and so we as his followers are called to take the way of the Cross. By faithfully following Jesus in a cruciform, selfless life of sacrificial love, we best represent him winsomely to the world.

This word translated "example" (hypogrammos) in verse 21 is a bit weak, being better translated as "pattern." This word was used for a pattern of letters over which children learning to write could trace letters (Jobes, 195, Wheaton, 1242). Jesus, who gave himself to us in selfless, sacrificial and unconditional love is the pattern we are to follow in our living for others. It's not so much a matter of asking "What would Jesus do?" as it is simply letting Jesus do his loving action through us as we surrender to his will and submit ourselves in service to others. It's letting Jesus live through us and allowing him to live his life as us, indwelling our lives, occupying the place of Lordship in our lives (a key point made by Dan Stone)

The winsome life is the serving, suffering life, and what Gregory Boyd calls the life of "power under" instead of "power over" (Boyd, 18ff). Often we evangelical believers in the West, who have enjoyed a measure of political influence, have sought to exercise power over culture and society in such a way that the Cross, the way of Christ, is obscured and even denied. What reveals Christ and has the real power to change hearts is the way of Christ, who came to serve and to surrender himself in selfless, sacrificial love.

Peter concludes by saying that Jesus' life, though by outsiders looked like defeat and failure, was the most successful and triumphant life ever lived because he perfectly followed the will of the Father in the way of the Cross. His suffering and death accomplished our forgiveness and redemption and made possible our new life in him, which is also a victorious life through the way of the Cross and the resurrection (24).

Our part in living the winsome life is to keep coming to the great, good, and chief Shepherd, the Lord Jesus, to whom we came when we first believed (25). He is our overseer, our true bishop and keeper of our souls, of our very lives, both now and forever.

Conclusion:

In this godless culture, take heart. God is at work, just as he was on Good Friday and Easter Morning, just as he is in places of the deepest spiritual darkness. We have the opportunity to live winsome lives that will bring glory and honor to Christ through the fruit he produces in us and through us. Our part is to follow the strategy of being godly people who impress those around us with Christ-like, loving acts; to willingly submit to the authorities God has placed over our lives; and follow the pattern of Christ in faithful suffering.

“And I thank God that he has given me the love to seek to convert and adopt as my son the enemy who killed my dear boys.” Edmund Clowney notes that “These were the words of Korean Pastor Yang-won Son. The year was 1948; the place was the town of Soon-chun, near the 38th parallel. A band of Communists had taken control of the town for a brief period, and had executed Pastor Son’s two older boys, Matthew and John. They died as martyrs, calling on their persecutors to have faith in Jesus,” continues Clowney. “When the Communists were driven out, Chai-sun, a young man of the village, was identified as one who had fired the murderous shots. His execution was ordered. Pastor Son requested that the charges be dropped and that Chai-sun be released into his custody for adoption. Rachel, the thirteen-year-old sister of the murdered boys, testified to support her father’s incredible request. Only then did the court agree to release Chai-sun. He became the son of the pastor, and a believer in the grace of Jesus Christ” (Clowney, 113f).

Obviously Pastor Son was aware of the presence of God, and with a loving fear of God, which drives out all other fears, he was ready and able to follow the pattern of the Lord Jesus, who gave himself for us. Pastor Son knew the grace of divine forgiveness toward the one who murdered his son, the grace of the heavenly Father who gave his Son into our murderous hands.

The kind of living and witnessing that will move a godless culture to faith in Christ is living in the pattern of Christ, motivated by his love and empowered by the Holy Spirit. It won’t be through “power evangelism” but rather “power under” evangelism, living and speaking the message of the Cross. We must not resist evil or try to do ministry or evangelism in our strength; nor must we

retreat into a shell of isolation, timidity, passivity or indifference. Our programs of ministry and outreach are important and we need your support and participation. But our first priority is to live a life that pleases God. We must live winsomely by the power of the Crucified.

Thoughts and questions for personal reflection and/or group discussion:

1. What is the evangelism strategy that Peter sets forth in verses 11 & 12? How can this strategy be effective in leading the unconverted to Christ?
2. In what ways have you observed damage to the message of Christ by the lives of professing believers/nominal Christians?
3. In what ways might submission to the Roman government in the 1st Century have been difficult for followers of Christ?
4. What are ways we as followers of Christ and members of his church might show our submission and even our grateful appreciation for government, communities and law-enforcement officials?
5. What might have been the limits to submission, as we read in Acts 5:29? What circumstances can you envision when you might have to choose to obey God rather than human authorities?
6. How is it possible to show love and respect for those who give you trouble at work (perhaps your boss) or perhaps in the community where you live?
7. How might you practice the presence of God in your daily life, so that you can receive his encouragement (verse 19)?
8. What does it mean for you to follow the pattern of Christ in the way of the Cross, to use “power under” (loving service) rather than “power over” (political or personal forcefulness or coercion)?

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