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THE PILGRIM LIFE

1 Peter 2:11-12

by

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1 Peter Lesson 10

THE PILGRIM LIFE 1 Peter 2:11-12

My subject today is one that used to be a major theme among Christians, but today it is strangely absent from Christian thinking. I'd venture to say that most of you, even those who have been Christians for years, have heard few, if any, sermons on this topic. To my knowledge, there are no recent Christian books on the subject, although the second best-selling Christian book behind the Bible ("Pilgrim's Progress") deals with this important theme. My subject is the pilgrim life--the fact that we are just passing through this life, journeying toward heaven. We are on this earth only for a short while and we should feel as settled in this world as we would feel if we were traveling in Mongolia. It may be a fascinating place to visit, but you wouldn't want to sink down roots there.

To us, the word "pilgrim" reminds us of the quaint folks who came over on the Mayflower in 1620. We may think about them with their broad brimmed hats each year at Thanksgiving as we wolf down our turkey dinner. But we don't identify much with them.

Being a pilgrim just isn't the dominant model of the Christian life for our times. Our view of Christianity is geared to the here and now: What will it do for my marriage? How will it help me raise my kids? Will it help me succeed in my career? Will it help me overcome personal problems? Will it help me feel fulfilled as a person? Heaven is thrown in as a nice benefit at the end of the ride. But heaven is not our focus. We want to enjoy life now and cling to it as long as we're able. We don't view death as the gateway to everything we've been living for. We see it as something to be postponed and avoided at all costs. We don't view ourselves as pilgrims.

In the summer of 1986, this truth hit me in a fresh way. I was preaching through 1 Corinthians and came to 15:19: "If we have hoped in Christ in this life only, we are of all men most to be pitied." I thought, "Can I truthfully say that?" For me, the Christian life is the best way to live. I have a wonderful wife and children. I have the family of God. I

have fellowship with my Creator and Savior. His Word guides me. I enjoy all the blessings He bestows. Where else can you find a way of life that brings as much joy as Christianity?

There's nothing wrong and everything right about enjoying God and the blessings He freely bestows on us in this life. But if we don't hold the things of this life loosely and aren't focused on God Himself and on being in heaven with Him as our goal, we are holding to a shallow form of Christianity. If we're just living for the good life that being a Christian gives now, we wouldn't last a minute under persecution. We wouldn't endure much suffering. Nor would we withstand the many temptations to indulge in fleshly desires. The only thing that can steel us to endure suffering and to seek holiness in this wicked world is to live as pilgrims, bound for heaven.

That's what Peter wanted his persecuted readers to see-- that the Christian life is a pilgrim life. We're aliens and strangers on this earth. Peter shows us four things we must do to live as pilgrims:

To live as pilgrims, there is a mindset to adopt, a war to fight, a lifestyle to maintain, and a day to remember.

1. To live as pilgrims, there is a mindset to adopt.

"Beloved, I urge you as aliens and strangers..." (2:11). That's how we are to think about ourselves: Beloved by God we are thus aliens and strangers on this earth which is for now under the dominion of the evil one. Thus we're not simply foreigners, we're on enemy turf! We dare not forget it! Our sense of identity should not be derived from this world, but from our relationship to God and His people, bound for heaven.

At the heart of this mindset is the precious truth that we are beloved by God. Peter uses "beloved" as a form of address to assure his readers of his love for them. But beyond the apostle's love, the term reminds them of God's love for them. The reason that they are out of sync as aliens and strangers in this evil world is that they are the special objects of God's redeeming love in Christ (1:1-5). His great love is the motive that enables us to endure hardship as we live as pilgrims.

I don't want to belabor the point, since Peter doesn't camp on it. But I do want you all to cement in your heart, as the central motive of the Christian life, the unfathomable love of God as shown to us in the cross of Jesus Christ. The fact that God loved me enough to send His beloved Son to die for my sins should motivate me to endure any hardship for the few years I am upon this earth.

Peter says, "Seeing yourself as beloved by God, also view yourself as an alien and stranger in this wicked world." "Alien" and "stranger" are used synonymously. They point to one who is a temporary resident or traveler in a foreign country, passing through on his way to his home country. Such a person has a different mentality about life than a permanent native has.

For one thing, a traveler doesn't live according to the customs and standards of the foreign country. For the sake of not offending the locals, he may temporarily adopt some of their customs. When we traveled in the Orient, we learned that when you use a toothpick after a meal, you must conceal it under your hand. So we followed their custom temporarily, but as soon as we got back home, we did it the American way. As citizens of heaven, we may adopt some of the ways of earth, if they are morally neutral, in order not to offend the natives. But we live according to different standards than they do, namely those of God's Word.

Pilgrims don't get attached to the country they're passing through. They have a destination in mind, and they look forward to getting there. If they pass through a scenic area, they'll enjoy the beauty, but they won't decide to move there. If they stop at a nice hotel, they don't start hanging pictures on the wall and settling in. They have a transient mentality that affects how they live on the trip.

One thing that has shifted our focus from being aliens on earth, looking toward heaven, is modern medicine. I'm very thankful for the advances in medicine that enable us to recover from diseases and injuries that would have killed people a generation ago. But at the same time, good medical treatment has removed the stark reality of death from us in a way that was not true in earlier times. Even at the turn of the century, it was rare for families not to have lost at least one child in death. The Puritan theologian John Owen (1616-1683) lost ten of his

eleven children before they reached adulthood. His other daughter died as a young woman.

In the face of death, you don't get as attached to this life, and you live more consciously in light of heaven. Howard Hendricks has said, "Most people think that they're in the land of the living, heading toward the land of the dead. But the truth is, we're in the land of the dying, heading toward the land of the living." As a young man, Jonathan Edwards resolved to think much, on all occasions, of his dying, and of the common circumstances which attend death. That may sound morbid and it runs against the grain of our day. But I think it's biblical. We're aliens and strangers on this earth, heading as pilgrims toward heaven. We've got to adopt that mindset, which includes constantly remembering that we aren't staying here for long. Our home is in heaven. We should live like it!

2. To live as pilgrims, there is a war to fight.

"Abstain from fleshly lusts which wage war against the soul" (2:11). To abstain means "to hold oneself constantly back from." Waging war points, not to a single battle, but to a military campaign. Every believer faces a lifelong struggle against these fleshly lusts which, if yielded to, will take a person captive and destroy him.

These lusts wage war against the soul, by which Peter means the total person. But the word "soul" connotes the nuance of the inner person. The battle against sin is waged in the mind (1:13-14). If you can win the war against sin in your thought life, you will win in your behavior. All sin starts in the mind and must be defeated there. We must learn to take every thought captive to the obedience of Christ (2 Cor. 10:4).

What are "fleshly lusts"? They include, but are not limited to wrong sexual desires. They also include "all kinds of self-seeking, whether directed toward wealth, power, or pleasure" (Ramsey Michaels, *Word Biblical Commentary* [Word], p. 57). Unbelievers, who are ignorant of God and His Word, live for self. Everything they do is directed to promote self, please self, or protect self. Such people shrug off God and often mock Him (2 Pet. 3:3-4). But they are enslaved to their lusts, which they thought would bring them freedom (2 Pet. 2:18-19). But

Christians can live for the will of God, which is opposed to the lusts of men (1 Pet. 4:2; 1 John 2:15-17).

Please note that it is believers whom Peter exhorts to abstain from such fleshly desires. Becoming a Christian does not eradicate the strong, inner, emotional tug toward self-will and sin. Walking with God for years does not eliminate the need to do battle with sin. I used to find it odd that the godly George Muller, as an old man who had walked with God for years, used to pray, "Lord, don't let me become a wicked old man." But he knew the propensity of his heart toward sin.

It is significant that many of God's giants who fell into sin did so after years of walking with Him. Noah got drunk and was indecently exposed after the flood. David, the man after God's heart, was probably in his early fifties when he fell into sin with Bathsheba. Elijah's faith wavered after years of boldly proclaiming God's Word to the wicked Ahab and Jezebel. Hezekiah, a godly king who brought great reform, late in his life fell into the sin of pride. As long as we live in this body, we must be vigilant and fight against these inward desires to go our own way and gratify ourselves in opposition to the will of God. Our old nature is not eradicated at conversion and it does not grow weaker as we grow older. We're in a war for the rest of the time that we're in this body.

Also, note that we are able and responsible to obey this command to abstain from these fleshly desires. Certainly such fleshly desires are powerful. The word "war" points to a fierce, constant struggle which implies a fair amount of effort on our part. If we yield, we can become enslaved to them (2 Pet. 2:18). But through saving faith in Jesus Christ and through the power of the indwelling Spirit and the Word of God, we can abstain from these lusts. We can experience God's victory in the war.

I make this point for two reasons. First, there is a teaching that says that we are not to struggle or exert ourselves in the Christian life. If we are struggling, they say, it is the flesh. We are rather to let go and let God. We just rest or abide in Him, and He gives us the victory. The Christian life is portrayed as effortless and easy. I bought into that teaching for a while as a young man, but it didn't help me overcome the lusts of the flesh. It is not balanced teaching. Peter does not urge us to

rest, but rather actively to abstain from these lusts which war against our soul.

The second reason I make the point is that we're hearing a lot in our day about "sexual addiction." I heard a tape by a Christian psychologist on the subject. He belittled pastors as being simplistic in dealing with what he presents as a complex psychological problem. His answer is to get people into support groups and to follow his psychological path to recovery.

But sexual addiction is not a recent problem. The Bible calls it being enslaved to sin. Also, it's not a psychological problem; it's a spiritual problem. The answer to it is not found in psychological insights, but in the provision God has given through the cross of Christ, the Holy Spirit, and His Word. Sexual addicts don't recover (as if it's an illness); they must learn to repent (since it is sin). I'm not suggesting that it is simple to overcome. Sometimes habits of sin are deeply entrenched and the struggle to overcome them is intense and protracted. But the answers we need are in the sufficiency of Jesus Christ, not in psychoanalysis.

Thus, to live as pilgrims, there is a mindset to adopt: strangers and aliens; there is a war to fight: abstain from fleshly lusts.

3. To live as pilgrims, there is a lifestyle to maintain.

"Keep your behavior excellent among the Gentiles" (2:12). The word "behavior" (used in 1 Pet. 1:15, 18; 3:1, 2, 16; 2 Pet. 2:7; 3:11; the verb is used in 1 Pet. 1:17 & 2 Pet. 2:18) means conduct, way of life or lifestyle. It points to the overall flavor of our lives. The word "excellent" means good in the sense of beautiful or attractive. Our lives should be marked by "good deeds" which conform to God's Word, but which also, in a lesser sense, are viewed by even a godless culture as attractive. The world should look at the lives of Christians and admit, even if they don't accept Christ or the Bible, that we are good people.

Note that the pagans ("Gentiles") observe our good deeds. This word only occurs here and in 3:2. It has the nuance of long-term, reflective observation. Even if you're not aware of it, unbelievers are watching your life. They see how you react to things at work. They

observe how you talk about others. They watch how you deal with problems. They note how you treat your family. Missionaries who have gone to primitive cultures tell of how the natives will often come and stand at their open windows, watching everything they do to see how they do it. The native pagans in America may not be so blatant. But they are watching you as an alien and stranger.

But Peter is not so naive as to think that our good deeds will result in the immediate conversion of the lost. Rather, out of jealousy, guilt, or insecurity, they may slander us. Often they will try to get us to break down and be just like them. The early church was often accused of murder, incest, and cannibalism in their secret church meetings. After all, they met to eat some man's flesh and drink his blood, they called one another brother and sister and were affectionate toward each other! They were even called atheists because they refused to worship the emperor and had only one God!

But Peter says that as pilgrims, we are to maintain a lifestyle of attractive deeds, even in the face of ugliness from those who are lost. It will result ultimately in glory to God (2:12), which is the overall aim of the Christian life.

Cal Thomas, a committed Christian who is a syndicated newspaper columnist, wrote ("Tabletalk," 8/91, p. 13),

I got a letter from an editor of a newspaper that recently started carrying my column. He said, "I'm so frustrated because I'm the only believer on the entire editorial staff." I wrote back and said, "Let's say that you weren't on the newspaper staff but that you were a CIA plant in the politburo of the Soviet Union. Would you be complaining that you were the only one there? You would be rejoicing that your government had placed you in such a strategic position." That is the attitude we ought to have. God has placed us in strategic positions no matter what our job is, whether we are employed or not. If we can catch that vision, if we can see ourselves as the spiritual equivalent of CIA plants and the world as the politburo, then I think we can get on fire for God and really do something significant.

Thus as pilgrims in enemy territory, we adopt a mindset as aliens; we fight a war against fleshly lusts; we maintain a lifestyle of good works, even when we are treated unfairly or wrongly by the lost.

4. To live as pilgrims, there is a day to remember.

Peter says that those who observe our good deeds will “glorify God in the day of visitation” (2:12). What is “the day of visitation”? Either it refers to God’s visitation in saving these pagans, or it refers to the future day of judgment. Most commentators take it to mean that these pagans who slander Christians will glorify God when they later get saved as a result of observing the Christians’ good works.

I don’t interpret the phrase in that way because Peter doesn’t make it clear that all (or even most) of these pagans will be converted by seeing our good works. (In 1 Peter 4:5, 17-18, he indicates that many will face God’s certain judgment.) In the context, he is saying that God will vindicate the Christian’s righteous behavior, apart from what happens to those who persecute us (see 2:15). Thus I take the day of visitation to refer to the future day of judgment.

How, then, will pagans glorify God in that day? Some will be converted before that day because, humanly speaking, they observed the good deeds of Christians whom they persecuted. Thus they will glorify God for His saving grace and for the faithfulness of His people. Others will stand before God with every excuse for their unbelief and rebellion knocked out from under them. At that point God will be vindicated and their once-defiant knees, too, will bow and their once-proud tongues then will confess that “Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of God the Father” (Phil. 2:9-11).

For us, the point is that as pilgrims, we keep that great day of visitation in view. We live now knowing that one day everyone must stand before God, either for commendation or condemnation. Thus we should seek to live with that day in view, so that we will hear, “Well done, good and faithful servant!” And as we live with that day in view, we should seek to persuade those who are on the road to condemnation to receive God’s mercy before it is too late.

Conclusion

It's so easy to get caught up in the American lifestyle--to live for yourself, or perhaps for yourself and your family. Without even trying, you begin pursuing personal pleasure and affluence as the goals of your life. You want to get a little nicer house, a newer car, and a few more trinkets to make life more enjoyable. And God? The church? To the extent that they fit into that scheme and help you reach those goals, you get involved. But in the final analysis, you're living for the same thing as everyone else in this world: Self-fulfillment and personal happiness.

Jonathan Edwards has a wonderful sermon titled, "The Christian Pilgrim" (*The Works of Jonathan Edwards* [Banner of Truth], 2:243-246). That great pilgrim wrote (p. 244):

God is the highest good of the reasonable creature; and the enjoyment of him is the only happiness with which our souls can be satisfied.-- To go to heaven, fully to enjoy God, is infinitely better than the most pleasant accommodations here. Fathers and mothers, husbands, wives, or children, or the company of earthly friends, are but shadows; but the enjoyment of God is the substance. These are but scattered beams; but God is the sun. These are but streams; but God is the fountain. These are but drops; but God is the ocean.-- Therefore it becomes us to spend this life only as a journey towards heaven, as it becomes us to make the seeking of our highest end and proper good, the whole work of our lives; to which we should subordinate all other concerns of life. Why should we labor for, or set our hearts on, any thing else, but that which is our proper end, and true happiness?

God is calling you to a radical way of life--the pilgrim life. You pursue God and the enjoyment of all that He is instead of living for this world's pleasures or for self-fulfillment. Of course, it is the only way to true self-fulfillment as well, because, as Jesus said, if you seek your life, you'll lose it; but if you lose your life for His sake, you'll find true life indeed.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Is it wrong for pilgrims to seek and enjoy the comforts of this life? Give biblical reasons.
2. How can a Christian enslaved to sin obey Peter's command to abstain from fleshly lusts?
3. Is it wrong for pilgrims to want to extend their lives on this earth as long as possible?

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