

2:11-12—PLAYING BY DIFFERENT RULES

The Text (NRSV)

¹¹*Beloved, I urge you as aliens and exiles to abstain from the desires of the flesh that wage war against the soul.* ¹²*Conduct yourselves honorably among the Gentiles, so that, though they malign you as evildoers, they may see your honorable deeds and glorify God when he comes to judge.*

What's going on here?

The previous section came to a climax at 2:9-10 as the Christian community was given title after title (“chosen race”, “royal priesthood”, “holy nation”, etc.) to mark believers as the precious and beloved children of God. In a sense, those titles, which had first been applied to the new nation of Israel in Exodus 19, were the *indicative* that is now going to be followed by the *imperative* (see back to Session Three for more on this *indicative-imperative* flow in the New Testament epistles). In other words, 2:9-10 told Christians who they were in God’s eyes—“chosen” and “holy” even as Christ was “chosen and precious in God’s sight” (2:4), and now 2:11ff is going to tell us some more of what it means to live as the chosen and holy people of God in the world.

Again, the order is important—Christ has made them God’s beloved, and there is nothing to be done about it; all we can do as the beloved of God is to grow more fully into that new identity, to become who we are. So as we delve into this new section of material (2:11-3:22) on living out our faith by humble submission and suffering, we need to keep in the back of our minds what just came before—the unconditional declaration that we are chosen and precious in God’s sight in Christ.

Keeping that in mind, our author reminds his audience that even though God declares them to be beloved and holy, their status in the world will often be that of “aliens,” “exiles,” and even “evildoers.” And really, even those first two titles are in some sense intended to be words of comfort for believers, since they

probably allude to Abraham, who is called an “alien and an exile” in Genesis 23:4 and who is yet the recipient of God’s faithful promise and love. Our author wants to reinforce for his readers that they are inheritors of that same promise, even as they come to be regarded as outcasts by the society around them. And at the same time, those first readers are also called to act in such a way that those who would call them “evildoers” are compelled to glorify God because of them.

In some ways, one can hear echoes of Jesus here with 1 Peter: “Let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven” (see Matt. 5:16—notice how in Matthew, too, this idea follows from being persecuted for the sake of following Jesus). While we have no way of knowing whether our author wants to allude to those particular sayings of Jesus, the logic underneath both seems to be the same: in the face of persecution, believers are called to respond with the kind of recognizably good conduct that will witness to the truth of their faith and glorify God. The rest of this large chunk of the letter (through the end of chapter three) will develop this idea.

How will the Christian community witness to the rest of the world about the truth of their faith, even as they begin to be pushed to the fringes of society? 1 Peter will offer some answers to that question by making use of a *household code*. This is a feature found in many different ancient sources, and they even turn up in some New Testament epistles like Ephesians and Colossians (see the discussion of household codes on Page 2). The point of these codes is to describe the kind of behavior and lifestyle appropriate to different members of a household. For example, 1 Peter 2:18-25 will talk about how slaves should live within the household. But for 1 Peter, this is not just about morality for morality’s sake; here in 2:11-12, the emphasis is on how our actions can be a witness, even amidst hostility. These two verses provide a bridge between *who* we are and *how* we act that out each day.

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LOOKING FOR MORE?

*Other NT authors make use of **household codes**, including:*

- **Ephesians 5:21-6:9**—*This passage includes directions to spouses, children, parents, slaves, and masters, **all** of whom are called to “be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ.”*
- **Colossians 3:18-4:1**—*These verses address the same groups, although in a condensed fashion.*

HOUSEHOLD CODES AND THE YOUNG CHURCH

The second and third chapters of 1 Peter probably make use of a common bank of Christian teaching on how different members of a family should live in their new faith. As the church grew up, that teaching often took the form of a *household code*, a form which was common among non-Christian writers as well in the 1st century. A household code, as its name suggests, commended certain kinds of behaviors and actions for different members of a household—often including directions for parents and children, wives and husbands, slaves and masters. We tend to see these codes in New Testament books generally as time wore on and the church found itself at odds with the surrounding culture (much as in 1 Peter). As that happened, one strategy for the young church's survival and witness was to stress and emphasize the ways its own ethics and lifestyle matched up with the best of the virtues of the world around them. And so here in 1 Peter 2:12, we get the command to do the kinds of actions that will be recognized by "Gentiles" (here that means non-believers), which assumes that at least at some level, both groups can identify what is *good* when they see it.

Similarly, these Christian household codes emphasized that the new community of believers was not a threat to the government and order of society, (*or at least not a violent one*). This was important because so much of the earliest Christian teaching really does have a political edge to it that could have gotten believers in deep trouble and meant the end of the church from the beginning. The Christian confession that "Jesus is Lord" (*Lord* being a title of Caesar, also) was a slap in the face to the empire and its rule, and in fact, early on, Christians came to be suspected of political subversion and threatening the establishment. And while it was—and is—true that Christianity's faith in God subverts every other allegiance and calls us to expose all the powers that pretend to take God's place, the ancient Christian community never understood its own mission to be violent or bent on overthrowing the govern-

ment. Nevertheless, Christians were often perceived that way—they were threats to the government because they claimed a different "Lord," and they were threats to the religious systems of the day because their God was invisible (and they would not worship the emperor). Interestingly enough, Christians were also perceived as threats to the institution of the family and of the social fabric itself; in fact, an early charge against the church was that it practiced incest (since Christians, including husbands and wives, would get together for *love feasts*, where they called each other "brother" and "sister").

Given this kind of public perception of the church, the use of *household codes* that emphasized continuity with the non-Christian world became prevalent to counter the bad press the early church was getting. These codes were intended to show that Christians were not bent on breaking up families or committing incest, nor were they plotting to overthrow the empire in a bloody coup.

Of course, the challenging question for the church in later ages is whether those early Christian household codes, for all their good intentions, blunted the subversive edge of the Christian faith and bought into the prevailing culture too much. For example, in the name of debunking the fears that Christians were anti-family, did the young church reinforce the domination of women in a way that the earliest Christians did not intend? By telling slaves that they should be obedient and willing to suffer, did the early church open itself up to practically approving of slavery? These questions force us to ask further how we can use and apply early Christian household codes to our times. And in fact, we may come up with different answers about how to live as families in the world. But 1 Peter *does* compel us to see that our actions will say *something* about our faith, whether we intend it or not. The challenge for us is to be intentional about witnessing to our "living hope" in all that we do.

CONNECTIONS—THIS LITTLE LIGHT OF MINE

- ❖ Saint Francis is reported to have said, "Preach the gospel at all times, and if necessary, use words." There is an assumption there that we say something about our faith in how we act, even without using religious language, or even *any* language sometimes. What are ways that your faith is expressed in your everyday actions? What other things do our actions communicate about us, whether intentional or unintentional?
- ❖ Christians in 1 Peter's day seem to have been called "evildoers" at times for their actions. What kinds of actions might Christians take today that could get us labeled as evildoers?
- ❖ What are some values or virtues that Christianity has *in common* with 21st century American culture? What are some values that are really *at odds* with our society? Are there virtues of our culture that get placed upon the church that should not be? What might they be?
- ❖ What is the difference between doing good works so that others will see them and glorify God and doing good things in order to win the praise and approval of others for myself? How might these two look different or similar in real life?

2:13-17—A SURPRISING FREEDOM

The Text (NRSV)

¹³For the Lord's sake accept the authority of every human institution, whether of the emperor as supreme, ¹⁴or of governors, as sent by him to punish those who do wrong and to praise those who do right. ¹⁵For it is God's will that by doing right you should silence the ignorance of the foolish. ¹⁶As servants of God, live as free people, yet do not use your freedom as a pretext for evil. ¹⁷Honor everyone. Love the family of believers. Fear God. Honor the emperor.

What's going on here?

Our author has just commended believers to live in such a way that their surrounding society will glorify God for their actions. Here he begins to unpack what that might look like in terms of submission to the authorities placed over them. This first section, 2:13-17, is generic and is addressed to all Christians in 1 Peter's audience; later, the letter will specifically address different groups, but this section commends humility and submission to *all* members of the church.

At first glance, this passage reads as though it is simply upholding the status quo, just reinforcing the oppressive structures of the empire. And so on first read, this may sound like a passage contemporary Christians don't want to deal with. But at a deeper level, this passage is not really about simply rubber-stamping whatever the empire or emperor (or any human power) says. Rather, this passage begins exploring how Christians live within a system as "exiles" and "aliens" without removing themselves from the world. This is about how Christians are called to live in the world, even amidst all the world's power games, but to play those games by different rules.

In a world where empires and emperors clamor to rule and use force to get their way, Christians are not to give in to that kind of way of life. And so rather than revolting with violence against the rulers who are placed over them, they are to "submit" to them and even to support them to the extent that those rulers do help to restrain evil in the world. This is a point where the English translation, "accept the authority" in 2:13 obscures the Greek behind it—the Greek might be better translated as "submit" or "live in submission." The difference here is that "accepting" authority seems to mean Christians have to approve of whatever the government does. This is not what 1 Peter has in mind, but rather he calls for Christians to live under the existing authorities without violent resistance. This will become clearer in the next major section of the letter, when slaves who are treated unfairly by their masters are addressed. 1 Peter's counsel to them will also be to "submit." That is *not* to say that abused slaves are supposed to like being maltreated, but

rather they are not to return abuse as retaliation even when they are abused. "Submission" does not mean consent, but it means refusing to return violence for violence.

Back in the present passage of 2:13-17, the idea is similar. Christians are by no means required to approve of everything the government does—in fact, part of the reason they were being excluded from society is that they refused to call the emperor their "Lord." But 1 Peter does call Christians away from the game-playing that uses force to get one's way. Instead, the Christian community will *both* witness to their "otherness" *and* show that they are not threats to the social fabric by living in submission that will not return violence for violence.

This passage also has a subversive edge itself in the reasoning it gives for submitting to the government: Christians are to submit themselves to *human* authority for the sake of their *Lord's* authority. This is *not* to say that all rulers are divinely appointed (a move that Romans 13 will make), but rather points to the way their Lord Jesus exercised his own authority—by submission (this will be fleshed out more fully in 2:18ff). In fact, our author emphasizes the emperor as a *human* authority and the empire as a *human* institution in a way that undercuts their claims to be divine. 1 Peter challenges the claims of the day that the emperor was himself divine by naming his power as merely human. So our text says to "fear God" (a term that indicates profound reverence and awe) but only to "honor" the emperor—*honor* being the appropriate treatment of *all* human beings. Christians should submit to the emperor, just as they are called to show deference and humble love for *every human*.

This is the subversive freedom of Christians—since they are the beloved children of God, they are free **from** the constraints of gaining power to prove their status. And instead, they are freed **for** love for all people. And the emperor is among that group of "all people." So Christian submission to the authorities around them is not an acceptance of their claims to be instituted by God but rather an expression of Christian submission and humble service to *all* humans. That kind of submission actually *undercuts* the pretentious claims of all empires—it plays the games of the world, but by different rules. And that kind of subversive submission calls attention to injustice by suffering injustice all the more, rather than creating more injustice by resorting to violence. It is by "doing right" in humble love that Christians stand in defiance of all that is arrogant and wrong. That makes Christians both radically free from the constraints of the world's games, and yet it also compels Christians to enter back into the world in submissive love.