

Strangers and Exiles

Gospel Faithfulness in a Changing World

1 Peter 2:9-12

With the Presidential primaries in full swing, it's no surprise to see the subject of immigration as a regular talking point. What do we do with America's immigration problems? What is surprising is how short most of our memories are, as displayed in the dismissive and sometimes downright ugly way we speak of immigrants. It's easy to forget that but for a handful of people, we are a country of immigrants. Families fleeing hardship, sometimes religious or political oppression, or just looking for a fresh start or a new chance to prosper in life. Or families whose ancestors were brought to this country against their will, to be sold as property to the highest bidder. We are, but for our native friends, a country of immigrants. For some of us here, that's a very recent memory indeed.

But when someone immigrates and takes up residence in a new land, away from their country of origin, one of the questions they'll be forced to address sooner or later is what to do about the 'strangeness factor'? When you come into a new country speaking a different language, eating different foods, wearing different clothes, with different social and family customs, you look strange to the people around you, and they look pretty strange to you. You're reminded daily that this is not your home. You are a stranger, an alien, an exile. How are you going to handle this?

Sociologists have noticed three general patterns for immigrant groups. "Some immigrants can wall themselves up from the larger culture, reenacting simply the ways and mores of the 'old country.'" ¹ Think of the proverbial Chinatowns or Little Italys of major American cities—neighborhoods where the language, food, and culture is largely a transplant from the country of origin, and is often handed down as such from generation to generation. You wouldn't know you were in a different country apart from the weather or your GPS location.

Second, "some immigrants can simply assimilate into the larger society, so that there's no longer anything distinctive about them at all."² Few may aim for this initially, but most will experience it within a few generations. My great-great grandparents came over from Holland speaking Dutch. My grandparents spoke Dutch at home when they didn't want their kids to know what they were saying. My dad understood that Dutch, but couldn't speak it. I don't know a single word. You wouldn't have a clue of my Dutch heritage if I hadn't told you.

"But between those two extremes, . . . [walling oneself off or total assimilation, some] immigrant communities combine a drive for freedom and self-determination (the reason they came in the first place) with a strong social network of fellow immigrants from the same country. These

¹ Russell Moore, citing sociological studies in *Onward: Engaging the Culture without Losing the Gospel* (Nashville: B&H, 2015), 77.

² Moore, *Onward*, 77.

immigrants navigate their new country with the best aspects of both their old and new countries, individual drive with community connection.”³ They retain an element of their strangeness—they don’t forsake their homeland or ethnic identity. But they’re fully engaged with life in their new home.

There’s a reason the apostle Peter address the church as “strangers,” “aliens,” and “exiles” in his first letter. “To those who are elect exiles of the dispersion” (v. 1). It’s not primarily because they were geopolitical exiles, though they may well have been.⁴ It is because ‘strangers and exiles’ is one of the best metaphors to describe our identity and experience as followers of Christ in a fallen world. There is a strangeness that comes from the fact that we are not at home. Our citizenship is in heaven, Paul says (Phil. 3:20). Peter says in ch. 1 that we have “born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, to an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, *kept in heaven* for you, who by God's power are being guarded through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time” (1 Pet. 1:3-5). And so as Steve Timmis and Tim Chester explain, “Christians are not strangers because they have moved from their homeland to a new country. They are exiles because their identity has so radically changed that they are no longer at home in their country of birth.”⁵

And this has been intensified for conservative Christians in America over the past several decades. We feel our strangeness in ways that prior generations didn’t. For most of our country’s history, it was culturally and socially advantageous to identify with Christianity, even if you didn’t believe it personally. And this name-only Christianity provided the foundation for the dominant moral vision of our past—the so-called ‘moral majority,’ ‘family values,’ ‘Leave it to Beaver’ kind of world. Being a Christian was easier then, though what often passed as Christianity was little more than a baptized version of the American dream, with Jesus as the means to the end of our national pride and personal fulfillment.

But the culture has changed. Exercising the Christian faith in the public square is no longer an asset, but a liability. Religious liberties that once protected that free exercise are now under attack and slowly eroding away. To identify with historic, orthodox Christianity in public is to risk being labeled or marginalized as fundamentalist, bigoted, narrow-minded, homophobic—on the wrong side of history. Christianity, we’re told, is not only outdated, but wrongheaded and toxic. Progressives no longer look for tolerance and acceptance; they claim the moral high ground, on everything from sexuality to assisted suicide to abortion—much of which was unthinkable just a decade or two ago. And they have the most powerful social institutions to back them. If Christianity is to have any place in this brave new world, we’re told, it had better get with the program and stop being so strange.

So what do we do in the face of this cultural sea-change? How do we handle the ‘strangeness factor’? Do we wall ourselves off—retreat from the public square, wringing our hands in self-pitying anxiety, or waving our fists in anger, standing in smug condemnation over a hell-bound culture? Or do we assimilate—reevaluate our readings of Scripture and revise our doctrine wherever it clashes with the prevailing cultural norms?

³ Moore, *Onward*, 77.

⁴ See Karen Jobes, *1 Peter* (BECNT; Grand Rapids: Baker, 2005), 23-41.

⁵ Steve Timmis and Tim Chester, *Everyday Church: Gospel Communities on Mission* (Re:Lit; Wheaton: Crossway, 2012), 32.

Or is there a way forward between these two extremes? A way that embraces the strangeness of our identity, while being fully engaged with the world we live in? Can we engage the culture in meaningful ways without compromising the gospel, as we interact with friends, family, and colleagues, and cultural institutions over potentially divisive topics?

These are the questions we're going to be exploring over the next several weeks at Westgate, as we move into a new section of our series on *The Gospel for all of Life*. We've been exploring this year what practical difference the good news of Jesus makes for different aspects of life—not just for how we begin a relationship with God, but how we grow in that relationship and serve him. We just finished looking at “The Gospel at Work,” and now we move into “The Gospel in the Public Square”—how does the good news of Christ shape our understanding of and engagement with some of the hot button topics that fill our Facebook newsfeeds or derail the civility of our family dinners and break room conversations?

This morning we're looking at 1 Peter 2 to help us build a general framework for cultural engagement; from here we'll explore how the gospel intersects with our entertainment culture, with social justice, and with the sensitive topics of homosexuality and abortion (with a missions conference in between).

As Russell Moore puts it in his book, *Onward* (probably the most helpful resource I've read on this subject), “Our call is to an *engaged alienation*, a Christianity that preserves the distinctiveness of our gospel while not retreating from our callings as neighbors, and friends, and citizens.”⁶ That's a great summary of what we see in 1 Peter 2:9-12. Go ahead and turn there with me if you haven't yet. How do we engage our culture in meaningful ways without compromising the gospel? First . . .

Remember your unique identity: *we are the redeemed people of a holy God.*

Verse 9: “But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession.” The most foundational question we must ask in discerning how to live in the world that surrounds us is one of identity: who are we? Who we are tells us how to live. If you are a Cuban living in America, but you identify primarily as a Cuban, then that will shape the way you conduct yourself during your time in America. The same is true of our identity in Christ. If I am first and foremost a Christian, who happens to live in America, then my Christian identity will tell me how to conduct myself “throughout the time of my exile,” as Peter puts it (1:17).

And as Peter describes our identity in vv. 9-10, he does so largely in the language of the Old Testament. A chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession. These are ways God described his covenant people Israel in the Old Testament (books like Exodus, Leviticus, and Deuteronomy). Since Jesus is the climax of Israel's story and the fulfillment of all God's promises to ancient Israel, through faith in Christ we are written into that ancient story. We take on that cherished identity. We become part of the redeemed people of our holy God.

One of the biggest problems in trying to figure out how to live a faithful Christian life in a fallen world is that we so often think that the story begins and ends with us. We have a very individualized, sometimes privatized, and therefore often compartmentalized, identity. We

⁶ Moore, *Onward*, 8.

position ourselves over the Christian faith, as the arbiter and evaluator of what is true and useful about the faith. Our operating question is not ‘how do I fit into Christianity,’ but ‘how does Christianity fit into me?’ But that’s the wrong question.

To understand how to live faithfully in a fallen world, we must see ourselves as part of the rich, ancient story of God’s plan to restore his fallen world and redeem a people for himself. The story doesn’t begin with us, and doesn’t end with us, and is not up to us to rewrite. It begins and ends with God—he is the author and the goal—his presence, his purposes, his glory and renown. This is his story, his world. He is the one who has the power to create it, the authority to rule it, and the wisdom to take it in the direction it should go.

And he writes us into his story not because we deserve it, but only by sheer grace. As Peter says in vv. 9-10, he has “called you out of darkness into his marvelous light. Once you were not a people, but now you are God’s people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.”

This mercy comes through the blood of Christ. Peter tells us in ch. 1, that we have been “ransomed from the futile ways inherited from [our] forefathers, not with perishable things such as silver or gold, but with the precious blood of Christ, like that of a lamb without blemish or spot” (1 Pet. 1:18-19). We “have been born again, not of perishable seed but of imperishable, through the living and abiding word of God” (1:23). This is our unique identity. We are the redeemed people of a holy God.

That makes us strangers here on earth. “We are not Americans first. We belong to another kingdom.”⁷ Our hope is not in Hollywood or Washington D.C.; nor is it in Boston or Cambridge, or Mayberry. Our citizenship is in heaven. So Peter says in ch. 2:11, “Beloved, I urge you *as sojourners and exiles* to abstain from the passions of the flesh, which wage war against your soul.” If we are to be faithful to God in a fallen and sometimes hostile culture, we cannot forsake our true identity and simply assimilate to the culture around us until there’s no longer any distinction. If Christianity is to be any blessing or make any contribution to the world around us, we have to keep it strange. Sin really is sinful, because God really is holy. Grace really is sufficient, because Christ’s blood really is enough.

That brings us to the second point. First, remember your unique identity, and second . . .

Proclaim your unparalleled message: *the excellencies of our redeeming God.*

Verse 9 again: “But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.”

We have a message that the world desperately needs to hear. Now that sounds pretty presumptuous and arrogant. But it’s not a message of how great we are; it’s a message of how excellent God is. And that message is *unparalleled*. There is no other news that is so good,

⁷ Russell Moore, “A Prophetic Minority: Kingdom, Culture, and Mission in a New Era,” *RussellMoore.com*, Sept. 19, 2013. Available at: <http://www.russellmoore.com/2013/09/19/a-prophetic-minority-kingdom-culture-and-mission-in-a-new-era/>.

because there is no other message that is so true, and makes such coherent and comprehensive sense of the world we live in, than the message of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Science does a great job of telling us what is; but it can't tell us what should be, or how we got here in the first place. Every other philosophy or religious worldview either lacks an adequate foundation for justice—to call evil what it is and bring it to rights; OR a viable foundation for mercy—a way to include evil people without compromising justice. No other message is able to bring those two together.

Only the gospel of Jesus gives us categories for a cohesive picture of where we come from, what life should be like, why it doesn't work the way it should, and what can be done about it. Only the gospel is able to resonate with our discontent in life while at the same time satisfying our longings. There is no other message that allows us to be brutally honest about how messed up this world is, and how messed up we are within it, because there is no other message hopeful enough and comprehensive enough to take everything that is wrong with this world and bring it together into an adequate solution that will one day make everything right. There is no other God so excellent, no other message so compelling or complete. Only the gospel of Christ crucified, risen, and coming again.

But this is the very message we're told we must abandon or update if the church is going to survive to the next generation. Certain sins can no longer be considered sinful. Hell is certainly out of the picture. Even the notion that God would send his Son to be punished for our sins—sins he didn't even commit—has been decried as divine child abuse.

This is a strange religion. But as Russell Moore reminds us, “Only a strange gospel can differentiate itself from the worlds we construct. But the strange, freakish, foolish old gospel is what God uses to save people and to resurrect churches (1 Cor. 1:20-22).”⁸ And of course the irony, as we talked about last week, is that if in our effort to reach the world, we become like the world, we actually become irrelevant to the world. We have lost our unique flavor, our unparalleled message.

In our changing world we must hold fast to the faith once for all delivered to the saints. As smart as we think we are, we cannot improve upon what God has decreed.

But this message is not just for us. We cannot lose the distinctiveness of the gospel through unfettered assimilation; but neither can we wall ourselves off from the surrounding world and retreat from the public square in an anxious and angry ghetto. Lobbing hand grenades of condemnation over the wall while we pine for the glory days of a Christian-ish culture filled with moral virtues but empty of real Christian faith. Don't forget, again citing Russell Moore: “Mayberry leads to hell just as surely as Gomorrah does. But Christianity didn't come from Mayberry in the first place, but from a Roman Empire hostile to the core to the idea of a crucified and resurrected Messiah. We've been on the wrong side of history since Rome, and it was enough to turn the world upside down.”⁹

⁸ Russell Moore, “Is Christianity Dying?”, *RussellMoore.com*, May 12, 2015. Available at: <http://www.russellmoore.com/2015/05/12/is-christianity-dying/>

⁹ Moore, “Is Christianity Dying?”

We are called to an *engaged alienation*, with our unique identity and unparalleled message. As Peter says in v. 12, we are to keep our conduct *among the Gentiles* honorable; we're to do life in the presence of non-believers. The church can no longer claim a 'moral majority.' But we are, as Moore puts it, what we probably should have been all along: a *prophetic minority*.¹⁰

And so Peter goes on to tell us what will take for us to remain faithful to the gospel, our prophetic witness, while engaging a culture that often opposed to Christ. We see two virtues in vv. 11-12: unpolluted desires and unassailable conduct.

Unpolluted Desires

Verse 11: "Beloved, I urge you as sojourners and exiles to abstain from the passions of the flesh, which wage war against your soul." The reality is, if we are to have any credibility or effectiveness in bearing witness to the gospel, we must first apply that gospel message to our own hearts. Because there is a war raging in our hearts, even as we speak. There is a battle between the Spirit and the flesh, and it is playing out on the battleground of desire. Our passions, longings, what we want out of life. Our flesh wages war, trying to entice us with the empty promises and fleeting pleasures of this fallen world. Wooing us to desert our post and forsake our king, which it knows will corrupt our witness. We've all seen the kind of damage that can be done when someone public about their faith is caught in scandal; it's one of our enemy's most effective strategies.

So we must fight desire with desire. Passions for the world with passions for Christ. We need what Thomas Chalmers famously described as "the expulsive power of a new affection"—an affection for Christ so big and so satisfying that it expels weaker desires for the lesser things of this world. That only comes by feeding on the gospel. Speaking the gospel. Clothing ourselves in the gospel. Fellowshiping in the gospel. Embracing our unique heritage and making it a central part of our lives. As Peter says in ch. 4, "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, so as to live for the rest of the time in the flesh no longer for human passions but for the will of God" (4:1-2). This will make us even weirder. Peter continues, "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.⁴ With respect to this they are surprised when you do not join them in the same flood of debauchery, and they malign you;⁵ but they will give account to him who is ready to judge the living and the dead" (4:3-5).

Don't be deceived. Sin really is sinful. And don't settle for lesser things. Grace really is sufficient. When we see Christ for who he is in all his beauty and excellence, our passions will be stoked for him and utterly unwilling to settle for anything less. Unpolluted desires.

Unassailable Conduct

Verse 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." As representatives of God's kingdom we're called to live lives of loving service that are above reproach.

¹⁰ Moore, "A Prophetic Minority."

The world loves nothing more than to catch a self-proclaimed Christian being inconsistent or hypocritical. And the reality is, we give them plenty to work with. But as representatives of Christ, we need to learn to prioritize holiness again. Not in a self-righteous piety, but in a God-enthralled, grace-fueled, Christ-reflecting love. We need to remember that one of the most powerful witnesses we will have is simply loving our neighbors, even when they act like enemies. Are we praying for them? Are we serving them sacrificially—not as a project, but as a person, as a friend? And when we find ourselves engaging sticky cultural topics, is our engagement by guided and shaped by the golden rule—to do unto others as I’d want them to do to me (cf. Matt. 7:12).

We all know how frustrating it is when some news article or Facebook post misrepresents what Christianity really believes or teaches. But how often do we do that to when engaging ideas or institutions we’re opposed to? Do we seek to understand and then engage; are we good listeners? Or do we willfully misrepresent in order to score points?

Do we conduct our lives in such a way—both our works and our words—that any slander that might assail us won’t actually be able to stick in the end? That the only thing our opponents can truly accuse us of is following Christ? Peter says in 2:19-20, “For this is a gracious thing, when, mindful of God, one endures sorrows while suffering unjustly. For what credit is it if, when you sin and are beaten for it, you endure? But if when you do good and suffer for it you endure, this is a gracious thing in the sight of God.”

We will be assailed and accused. Peter says in the very next verse, “For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you might follow in his steps” (2:21). As nuanced or winsome as we might try to be, people will still look for ways to accuse us or take offense. For example, “When evangelicals adopt children, the secularist Left accuses them of ‘stealing’ children for evangelism. And, if they didn’t adopt, the same voices would accuse them of caring for ‘fetuses’ without providing homes for ‘unwanted’ children after they’re born.”¹¹ Just this week, for pointing out the rather obvious fact that far from promoting women’s health, abortion actually dismembers women in the womb, I was called on Twitter an ignorant fool, a bigot, a woman-hater, a gay-hater, and someone offered to sterilize me to ensure my ‘stupidity’ can’t be replicated. It was a good week.

In a world that is scandalized by Christ’s claim that all authority in heaven and on earth belongs to him, his followers will find themselves maligned, reviled, accused of being on the wrong side of history.

But that’s just it. We’ve been given a glimpse into where history is going. We know that our Savior will return to restore this fallen world once and for all, and that when he comes he will judge the living and the dead. We have an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for us, who by God’s power are being guarded through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time, even though now, for a little while, if necessary, we are grieved by various trials (1:4-6).

¹¹ Moore, *Onward*, 19-20.

And so in the meantime, while we await Christ's return and serve him during the time of our exile, we have the confidence and hope to follow his example in the face of opposition. Ch. 2:22:

He committed no sin, neither was deceit found in his mouth.²³ When he was reviled, he did not revile in return; when he suffered, he did not threaten, but continued entrusting himself to him who judges justly.²⁴ He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. By his wounds you have been healed. (2:22-24)

And 4:19: "Therefore let those who suffer according to God's will entrust their souls to a faithful Creator while doing good." We are called to an alienated engagement with our culture "that preserves the distinctiveness of our gospel while not retreating from our callings as neighbors, and friends, and citizens."

Russell Moore writes,

The kind of exiles we are to be is not a bitter, resentful people, harkening back to better days, when we had more power and influence. We are to be instead those who know that the culture around us, whatever culture that is, is temporary. We are to pattern our lives not after nostalgia for the past but hope for the future.¹²

We are strangers and exiles, on our best days, but we are not orphans and wanderers. . . . Our strangeness is only hopeful if it is freakishly clinging to the strange, strange mission of Christ crucified and risen.¹³

Amen.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Questions for Study and Understanding

1. Read the opening section of Peter's letter in 1:1-12. What can we understand about the situation Peter is addressing through this letter?
2. What's happening before and after our passage that helps us understand the general context of 2:9-12?
3. How does Peter describe the church's identity in vv. 9-12? What Old Testament passages is he alluding to? (esp. in vv. 9-10; check your Bible's cross references or footnotes)
4. How is Peter able to apply descriptions of ancient Israel's covenant relationship with God to the church's identity today? (see 1:17-21; 2:4-5)
5. How does Peter describe our purpose in v. 9? What do you think he's talking about?
6. According to vv. 11-12, what will it take for the church to live out their identity and purpose in this fallen world?

¹² Russell Moore, "Are We Exiles?" *RussellMoore.com*, July 14, 2015. Available at: <http://www.russellmoore.com/2015/07/14/are-we-exiles/>.

¹³ Russell Moore, as cited in Sarah Pulliam Bailey, "Moore on the Margins," *Christianity Today*, Sept. 2015, 39.

Questions for Reflection and Application

7. How does your sense of identity line up with what we learned in question 3?
8. In what ways do we feel the strangeness of our faith as we interact with the culture around us?
9. Thinking of the three common ways immigrant communities cope with being strangers (walling oneself off in separation; complete assimilation to host culture; retaining best elements of each), in what ways does the church often wall itself off? In what ways is it tempted to completely assimilate?
10. Which of these three options do you feel more prone to personally?
11. What do you think the risks of an “engaged alienation” are today (both within and outside the church)?
12. If someone came to you seeking guidance in how to navigate a sensitive cultural topic, how would you help them address it in light of this passage?
13. Are there specific ways might we obey or apply the message of this passage as a church, or as a home group, or personally?