

“You Are a Chosen Race”

The Fourth in A Series of Sermons on 1 Peter

Texts: 1 Peter 2:1-12; Isaiah 26:14-22

Many of the elect exiles to whom Peter is writing have been forcibly removed from their homes, often because of their faith in Jesus Christ and for refusing to worship pagan deities. These exiles are undergoing a difficult time of trial and testing. They possess a heavenly citizenship and a living hope which determines what they believe and what they do. But how should these elect exiles think of themselves during their sojourn? Merely as individual sojourners, marking time until they die? What should their identity be as they struggle in this world, despised and rejected, and during times when their faith is put to the test? Peter answers this question in our text, vv. 1-12 of the second chapter of Peter’s first epistle.

In verses 13-19 of I Peter 1, the Apostle issues three imperatives (commands). These commands unfold against the background of the gospel promises made in the previous verses (vv. 3-12). Peter’s readers/hearers *already have been* sanctified by the Holy Spirit (set apart for God), *already have been* sprinkled with the blood of Jesus, and *have been* set apart for obedience. The commands which follow the gospel promises are given to the elect exiles (Christian believers) mentioned back in the opening verse of this epistle. Obedience to these imperatives, then, is the means through which elect exiles identify themselves as citizens of heaven (believers in Jesus), while they dwell in the midst of the civil kingdom, where they now find themselves undergoing various trials which test their faith.

The first imperative is that the Apostle instructs us to fix our hope upon Jesus (v. 13). Jesus will keep all of the promises he makes to us in the gospel. We live this life in light of the realization of God’s promise of a heavenly inheritance in the next. Second, Peter exhorts us to live holy lives which reflect the holiness of our creator and redeemer (vv. 14-16). We are to strive for holiness out of gratitude for all that God has done for us in Jesus Christ. The third imperative is that we are to live in the fear of the Lord, because the one we invoke as our Father is also judge of all the earth (vv. 17-19).¹ The practical implications of these commands are spelled out in the next section of this epistle, vv. 1-12, of chapter 2.

Far too often the imperatives in I Peter (and similar passages) are read by American evangelicals in light of individual and personal sanctification—in other words Peter is talking to me (not a church or group of Christians) and these imperatives primarily refer to “my personal walk with the Lord.” But the Apostle mentions the “love of our brothers [and sisters]” and commands us to love one another (v. 22) using language which comes from the Old Testament, and which applied to the people of Israel—a nation chosen by God, and set apart for his purposes. Peter now applies to same language to Christians in the context of their membership in Christ’s church. The command to love one another which is worked out in the opening verses of the second chapter (vv. 1-3), and which leads to a discussion of the church’s identity (in vv. 4-10), reminds us that sanctification and the striving for holiness take place within the community of sinful people who together believe in Jesus Christ, and this mirrors the nation of Israel in the Old Testament as a people “set apart” by God unto himself and for his purposes.

¹ Thomas R. Schreiner, *1, 2 Peter, Jude*, vol. 37, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2003), Logos, 1:13.

Our text raises two issues which we will consider in our time together. The first of these is that sanctification takes place within the day to day life of the elect exiles in communion with one another. It is easy to love your brothers and sisters when you are on a desert island by yourself. Sanctification takes place in real life with other people who are also sinners. In other words, to focus upon yourself misses the main point of sanctification—how believers deal with one another in their daily interactions. This is why sanctification is so difficult—my brothers and sisters in Christ are not as holy as I am, and it is their fault! The second thing for us to consider is that although Peter never uses the word “church” (*ecclesia*) in this section, the application of the command for us to love one another as given to Israel, and now applied to the love within the community of elect exiles, means that the church (as the people of the new covenant) is the new Israel²—a point we’ll flesh out in verses 4-10.

As we turn to our text (v. 1 of chapter 2), Peter uses another conjunction (*oun*) which tells us that what follows is an inference (or the implication) of the preceding. Because we have new life in Christ, we will desire to love one another—all those who have been given this same new life in Christ—and as Peter now says, we are to “*put away all malice and all deceit and hypocrisy and envy and all slander.*” Because sanctification entails being set-apart by God, for his purposes, which is why we are called to a life of holiness (striving to obey God’s commandments), holiness within the church begins by self-consciously “setting ourselves apart” from malice, deceit, hypocrisy, envy, and slander.

Malice is ill-will toward others. Deceit is hiding the truth, or not telling the truth. Hypocrisy is pretending to be something we are not. Envy is to desire what others have—from their possessions to their appearance and personalities. Slander is to cast someone in the worst possible light. Why would Peter mention these particular sins? The reason is simple—these are sins which eat away at the love elect exiles are to have for each other within the community of believers—the church. How can we love someone while demonstrating ill-will toward them? How can we love someone, and while lying to them, or pretending to be something we are not? How can we demonstrate love to those whom we envy and slander behind their backs? We cannot. These behaviors are sins of which we must repent, and for which we must seek forgiveness. These are the passions of our former ignorance (v. 14).

Peter directs us to put these things away. The verb he uses (*apotithēmi*) is used throughout the New Testament in reference to getting rid of those things which hinder our growth in Christ.³ It is bad enough that the daily circumstances of life as an exile in the Greco-Roman world made life perilous and a real struggle for Peter’s readers. It would be a real tragedy if persecuted Christians faced the same slander, malice, envy, and hypocrisy within the community of elect exiles (the church), especially when we all have been sprinkled with the blood of Jesus and possess the same heavenly citizenship. Elect exiles may be in the world, but we are also members of Christ’s church and must strive to leave behind our former ignorance to the things of God and the passions of the flesh.

It is one thing to renounce the kind of behavior which undermines the love believers are to have each for the other. Is another to prepare for action as Peter mentions in verse 13 of the previous chapter. One of the ways we prepare ourselves for action is by growing strong in the faith. To do so, we need spiritual nourishment. Previously, Peter spoke of the “*word [which] is the good news that was preached to you.*”

² C. E. B. Cranfield, *I & II Peter and Jude*, The Torch Bible Commentaries (London: SCM Press 1960), 59.

³ Schreiner, *1, 2 Peter, Jude*, Logos 2.1

In verses 2-3, Peter now speaks of those caused to be born again by God as being “*like newborn infants, [who] long for the pure spiritual milk, that by it you may grow up into salvation— if indeed you have tasted that the Lord is good.*”

Peter assumes that his readers/hearers are Christians, so his imperatives are not aimed at people who are becoming Christians, or who are in the process of being evangelized. We do not do the things Peter commands in order to become Christians. We do them because we are Christians. Yet, Peter realizes that a number of these elect exiles are still mere babes in the Christian faith. In order to grow to maturity in the faith, as well as the enjoy the full benefits of their salvation in Christ, they need proper food—pure spiritual milk, i.e., the word of God, the good news of the gospel.

Furthermore, they not only need it, they must learn to desire it. Hearing some pagan philosopher pontificate on the meaning of life may be far more interesting than listening to a sermon from a difficult and challenging book (like the Bible). But the so-called “wisdom” of Greek philosophy will be forgotten in but minutes, while the word of God stands forever (Peter’s point in the closing verses of chapter 1). The word of God is the word of life, that imperishable seed, through which dead people have been brought to life as babes in Christ—babes with a living hope, and who need the appropriate nourishment so that they grow strong, and stay strong during difficult times of testing.

We are to develop a desire for pure spiritual milk in conjunction with Peter’s exhortation to prepare ourselves for action. We do this by devoting ourselves to reading, studying, and understanding the word of God, which is the pure and proper spiritual food for both new and mature Christians, those who strive to grow into the fulness of that salvation accomplished for us through the person and work of our Savior Jesus. Believers who have tasted this pure spiritual milk, will desire it more and more. Peter’s words here—*if indeed you have tasted that the Lord is good*—echo verses 8-9 of the 34th Psalm (a Psalm which Peter must like because he will allude to it several more times in this epistle). There we read, “*Oh, taste and see that the LORD is good! Blessed is the man who takes refuge in him! Oh, fear the LORD, you his saints, for those who fear him have no lack!*” The Christian who tastes pure spiritual milk in the word, develops a taste for it (because the Lord is good) and will desire such milk more and more.

In verse 4, Peter takes up the theme of the church, the people of God, which is, as we will see, the new Israel. Elect exiles, set apart by God, who are striving to be holy as the Lord is holy, who fear God (in the sense we described last time), and who love their brothers and sisters, do so within the context of Christ’s church. I know that for many Christians, ecclesiology is nothing but the last section of Louis Berkhof’s *Systematic Theology* (which no one reads). But apostolic teaching about the church—its mission, its marks, and its offices—is a major theme in the New Testament epistles.

The lack of interest among American Christians in how we understand the mission, marks, and offices of the church allows shoddy teaching to thrive in evangelicalism such as the Moses model (where the pastor hears directly from God), or which allows rogue pastors to view the church as an extension of their own personal ministries. Peter’s description of the church as the new Israel, which is a chosen race set-apart by God for his purposes, is critical to the survival of elect exiles and sojourners in this present evil age (as Paul speaks of our age in Galatians 4:4). As elect exiles in their own land, citizens of heaven need an earthly identity while they sojourn in this world—they are to consider themselves to be members of a new race (chosen by God), a holy nation (a new Israel), and a royal priesthood (thanking and praising God).

In verse 3, Peter describes the goodness of the Lord—that Lord who is YHWH of Psalm 34. But in verse 4 of his epistle, Peter describes Jesus as the living stone rejected by men. “*As you come to him, a living*

stone rejected by men but in the sight of God chosen and precious.” Jesus is the “living stone” because of his resurrection from the dead.⁴ The living stone metaphor likely comes from Psalm 118:22 where the Psalmist speaks of the rejected stone becoming the cornerstone. Peter used this same image in his sermon in Acts 4:11, when he proclaimed to the Jews in Jerusalem that the risen Jesus is the stone of stumbling which Israel rejected, yet, who by virtue of his death and resurrection, is that only one upon whom men and women must call to be saved. Jesus was rejected by his own people. He was crucified by the Romans. Yet, Peter says, if you have tasted of his goodness (in the word), you know that Jesus is that one chosen by God to be the Savior of his people (his elect), and that he is the only mediator between sinful people and a holy God.

Peter’s audience of elect exiles must realize that if they have been made exiles and are persecuted for their faith in Jesus, the same Jesus in whom they trust was also rejected by his people, and he suffered far more than they. Jesus was despised by men (both Jews and Gentiles), yet he was absolutely precious to God. The same is true of elect exiles. Jesus, who was the rejected cornerstone (by Israel), is now the living stone and the foundation upon whom the living temple of God (the church) now stands. Therefore, in verse 5, Peter goes on to say of those who have been set apart (sanctified), sprinkled with his blood, and called to a life of holiness, *“you yourselves like living stones are being built up as a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.”* The language of Israel’s distinctiveness in the Old Testament is applied by Peter directly to the church.

Just as Jesus is the living stone (by virtue of his resurrection from the dead), so too those whom God has caused to be born again and who have a living hope are “living stones” of a spiritual house, laid down upon the foundation stone (Jesus). Peter’s readers/hearers may be exiles and aliens in this life, but they are God’s spiritual temple, and are set apart to be a holy priesthood, offering acceptable sacrifices to God through Jesus.

There are a number of important implications here—some of which we have briefly touched upon. First, the focus in the New Testament is upon the corporate sanctification of God’s people, not so much, as in American evangelicalism, upon the sanctification of the church’s individual members—the focus is corporate not personal. Cranfield puts it this way. “Everywhere the Bible presupposes a people of God. That is every bit as true of the New Testament as of the Old. The Scriptures know nothing of an individual piety which is out of touch with the living body of God’s people.”⁵ American Christians (especially in Orange County) think nothing of identifying themselves as Christians, and yet never seek to join, nor think it necessary to be a member of, a local church. I get the problems with denominations and religious formalism. But every person who becomes a Christian in the New Testament does so in the context of a local church. To profess faith in Jesus Christ is to profess that he is the living head of a spiritual body, which is his church. All believers are living stones in God’s spiritual house, and God’s spiritual house is manifest in the local church—as Michael Horton puts it, God’s embassy on earth.

Second, the language Peter uses is drawn directly from the Old Testament—specifically the temple and priesthood. This means that Christ’s church is the true Israel of God. In ancient Israel, the temple was a divinely mandated and appointed physical building (with its roots going back to the tabernacle in the midst of God’s people while they wandered in Sinai). The temple and its sacrifices were the center of

⁴ Schreiner, *1, 2 Peter, Jude*, Logos 2.4

⁵ Cranfield, *I & II Peter and Jude*, 63.

Jewish religious life. Israel's priests sacrificed on behalf of the people—the blood of animals granting a temporary respite from the wrath of God. Although these sacrifices pointed ahead to the coming of Jesus and his final, once for all sacrifice for sin, they must be regularly repeated.

In this epistle Peter flatly says that all elect exiles are living stones in a different kind of temple, a spiritual house. This spiritual house is built of living stones (those whom God has caused to be “born again”) and who are now described as spiritual priests who offer spiritual sacrifices. When Jesus died on Good Friday, it is not accidental that the temple veil—separating the holy place from the most holy place—was torn from top to bottom. The physical temple in Jerusalem had been superceded by the one to whom it pointed, Jesus. Throughout the letters of Paul (i.e., Ephesians 2:19-22; 1 Corinthians 3:16; 6:19; 2 Corinthians 6:16, 2 Thess. 2:4), the church is identified as the temple of God, while in John 2:21, Jesus is identified as the temple of God. When Jesus dies as the spotless Passover Lamb, the temple in Jerusalem was *ichabod*—its glory now gone. The implication of Peter's argument is that a new temple has taken the Jerusalem temple's place, a temple made up of God's people and built upon the foundation stone (Jesus), a temple which assembles on the Lord's Day to offer sacrifices of praise and thanksgiving.

As Peter explains, the Jerusalem temple belonged to the old order of things (types and shadows), the futile ways of Israel's forefathers (as Peter put it in verse 18). With the coming of Jesus, the reality has come. The temple of God is now composed of living stones with a living head—Jesus. This temple is the church, and its members are all priests who offer sacrifices—not animal sacrifices—but sacrifices of praise and thanksgiving. The idea is that when the people of God assemble together on the Lord's Day (Sunday, the day of Christ's resurrection, and the dawn of the new creation), we compose the living temple of God. We are all priests (hence, the priesthood of all believers). We have no levitical priests shedding the blood of sacrificial animals, because the great high priest has already offered the final and all-sufficient sacrifice for sin. But we are all priests of God (through the priesthood of Jesus), offering sacrifices of praise and thanksgiving to the Father, in the Son, and through the Spirit, because of what Jesus Christ has done for us. This is why we strive to obey the imperatives given us by Peter.

In verse 6, Peter cites Isaiah 26:16, (part of our Old Testament lesson). “*For it stands in Scripture: “Behold, I am laying in Zion a stone, a cornerstone chosen and precious, and whoever believes in him will not be put to shame.”* Following up his point in verse 4, that Jesus is the living stone, Peter clearly sees Jesus as the one to whom Isaiah is referring in this section of his prophecy. Jesus may be the stone rejected by his people, but he is foundation of God's redemptive work, including the building of a spiritual house with spiritual priests offering spiritual sacrifices.

Peter intends this to be of great comfort to his audience as people who have been forced into exile in their own land by a pagan Roman emperor who thought himself to be God. They are hated and persecuted. But so was Jesus, who was also despised and rejected. These elect exiles must not be discouraged or dismayed by what has happened to them. God's eternal plan for Jesus included his rejection by Israel—and he was without sin or guile. And in God's plan, the rejected one is now the foundation for all those living stones who may be rejected by their fellow citizens of Asia Minor, but who will never be put to shame by the Lord.⁶ It is worth noting that although Jesus himself had identified Peter as the rock upon whom he will build his church (in Matthew 16:17–18), Peter does not mention this point here, a

⁶ G. K. Beale and D. A. Carson, Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), 1026.

sure sign that Peter never considered himself the first Pope. Peter may have been the leader of the apostolic church (only to be supplanted by Paul), but Jesus is that one upon whom the church is built.

If believers in Jesus will not be put to shame, the same cannot be said of those who do not believe in Jesus. Peter speaks of the contrast between believers and the fate of unbelievers in verses 8-9. “*So the honor is for you who believe, but for those who do not believe, ‘The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone,’ and ‘A stone of stumbling, and a rock of offense.’ They stumble because they disobey the word, as they were destined to do.*” Quoting Psalm 118:22 and Isaiah 8:14 (verses cited by Paul as well) to make the point that those who reject Jesus stumble over his person and work—they do not understand what Jesus did and why, and they are offended by it—will face shame and dishonor when they stand before Jesus on the day of judgment.

This, Peter says, is the fate to which unbelievers have been destined. By not choosing them in Christ, God passes over them and leaves them in their sin. They suffer the very fate which they desire—they will be crushed by the very rock of offence (Jesus), over whom they stumbled (by rejecting him). Those who reject the cornerstone do so freely and gladly, and yet in doing so, bring to pass the very thing God had foreordained. The language here is similar to that of Acts 2:23—“*this Jesus, delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men.*” God decreed the death of Jesus, and yet holds those who did so fully responsible for their actions.

All those in Christ (i.e., those born again and who believe in Jesus), who are the living stones who compose a spiritual temple of priests offering sacrifices of praise and thanksgiving, are now described in verse 9 as a new Israel with all four phrases used of them by Peter taken from Old Testament texts applied to Israel (Exodus 19, Isaiah 43). “*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.*” Elect exiles compose the church which is the new Israel, which has for its mission to proclaim the gospel to the nations, so as to call people from darkness (ignorance of the truth and unbelief) into the marvelous light (the truth)—revealed in and through the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Our application is given to us by Peter himself in verses 10-12. If you were here last time, you may recall that we dealt with the question of how elect exiles identify themselves as citizens of heaven while we dwell in the civil kingdom. The answer we gave then—we demonstrate our heavenly citizenship by our doctrine and our lives (specifically our striving to obey the three imperative given us by Peter, that we fix our hope upon Jesus, live holy lives as the Lord is holy, and that we fear God) is restated here in slightly different terms.

In verse 10, Peter reminds these elect exiles that at one time they too were pagans. “*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.*” Elect exiles were once separated from God, but have been brought near to him through God’s mercy. The way in which exiles demonstrate that we are Christ’s people (a chosen race, a spiritual house, a royal priesthood) is spelled out by Peter in verses 11-12. “*Beloved, I urge you as sojourners and exiles to abstain from the passions of the flesh, which wage war against your soul. 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.*”

If we possess heavenly citizenship through faith in Jesus Christ, we are to see ourselves as a chosen race, a royal priesthood, and a holy nation—a people who are God’s own possession, even while, in this life, we are aliens, exiles, and sojourners. Peter’s word to us is to act like members of a chosen race, and as

citizens of heaven (who have been redeemed by Christ) during our time of exile. Because we fear God and strive for holiness, we are to abstain from the passions of the flesh because the sinful nature continues to wage war on our souls even through we are Jesus Christ's possession.

It is not distinctive clothing, a restricted diet, or isolation from non-Christians, which identifies us as citizens of heaven. It is our doctrine (our trust in Jesus' promise to save us from the guilt and power of sin) and our lives (our honorable conduct before the Gentiles) which identifies us as members of a chosen race of elect exiles. By grounding our witness to those around us in the finished work of Christ, and in our conduct which reflects Christ's on-going work in our lives, non-Christians will hear the gospel and witness how we wage war upon our own sinfulness, so that on the day of visitation (the day of judgment),⁷ God may be glorified.

Our identity is found in the fact that as elect exiles we are members of a chosen race, sinners who have been set apart by God to bring him glory—so let us strive to do exactly that, as our neighbor witnesses how a gracious God saves sinners through the blood and righteousness of Jesus Christ, and we how live lives of gratitude in response.

⁷ Peter H. Davids, The First Epistle of Peter, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 97; Cranfield, I & II Peter and Jude, 73.