

The Power of a Christian Testimony

Beloved, I beg *you* as sojourners and pilgrims, abstain from fleshly lusts which war against the soul, ¹² having your conduct honourable among the Gentiles, that when they speak against you as evildoers, they may, by *your* good works which they observe, glorify God in the day of visitation. (1 Peter 2:11–12)

In 203 AD, a young Roman woman named Perpetua was arrested in Carthage on these charges. She was twenty-two years old, nursing a newborn, from a wealthy family — but she refused to deny that she was a Christian. In the days before her execution she was watched constantly by a Roman prison guard named Pudens. Pudens was not ready for what he saw when he watched her: no bitterness, no bargaining for self-preservation, no emotional collapse. There was something in the way she spoke to the other prisoners, the way she carried herself in that cell, that he had no framework to explain.

By the time Perpetua walked into the arena to be killed, Pudens had become a Christian. The accused had converted her accuser.

Nearly two hundred years before that morning in Carthage, the Apostle Peter wrote to a church that was maligned, slandered and persecuted. And he made them a very bold promise: it is possible for your critics to become worshippers. Not through winning arguments. Not through mounting a legal defence. Not through retreating into a monastery and waiting for the world to change. But through the power of a life so unmistakably, inexplicably beautiful that some of the people who despise you are eventually brought to glorify God.

That is the extraordinary claim of 1 Peter 2:11–12. And this morning I want to show you how Peter says it happens.

You don't live in the ancient Roman nation that persecuted Christians, or even the modern nations of North Korea, Nigeria, Iran that still persecute Christians. But the world is still a cosmic battlefield. It is not friendly to believers in Christ. Even though God owns all creation, the world is still hostile territory to the Lordship of Christ. It is still under the sway of the Wicked One. Its goals, and ambitions, and loves and pursuits are enemies of God's glory, enemies of faith, enemies of truth.

Once you're a Christian, you are no longer truly at home here, but as a Christian, you must still live here. And as we do, we face a dilemma. If we are true to our faith, it stirs up resentment, criticism, hostility, and opposition from the world. The world does not like pure, undiluted Christianity.

If we want to have an easier time of it, we must assimilate into the world, accept their morals, beliefs, ways, and mute or limit our Christian message. We have to limit our message if we want our popularity with the world to thrive, or we have to limit our popularity with the world if we want our Christianity to thrive. Some Christians try to assimilate, ever tiptoeing on the line of compromise. Some Christians choose to separate from the world, and cultivate their Christianity in a corner, but never really witness to the world.

But Peter is going to teach us that we do not have to choose between seclusion and assimilation, between compromise and isolation. It is possible to be a faithful Christian without living in a monastery. It is possible to face both hostility from the world, and their eventual admiration and gratitude. It is possible to turn criticism into people's conversion. It is possible to turn slander into salvations. And it comes down to living a life as a testimony before the world.

In these two verses, Peter shows us how. In the chapter and verses before this, the apostle has been helping us understand our position in Christ: chosen pilgrims, destined for heaven, eternally secure, born again by the living Word of God into the family of God, fed by that same Word of God. We know our posture in this world is to be one of hope, holiness, and humility.

But now Peter transitions from position to practice, from the truth of who we are to the testifying of that truth before others. So now, in these verses, Peter gives us three ingredients of a powerful Christian testimony.

I. Deny the Flesh

¹¹ Beloved, I beg *you* as sojourners and pilgrims, abstain from fleshly lusts which war against the soul,

There's some teaching that is difficult to swallow coming, so Peter sweetens the bitter by calling Christians beloved. Loved ones. Loved by Peter, but bigger and greater, loved by God. These hard things are coming from a tender place. God the Father desires your best, your joy, your good, He does not willingly afflict the children of men. Whatever you have to suffer is the minimum you must face to become more like Christ.

Christians are not only loved, but Christians are sojourners and pilgrims. These two words mean virtually the same thing. A foreigner, residing in a place without citizenship. Someone who may be here for a while, but does not belong to the place. That's how Peter opened the letter in 1:1. Some of Peter's original readers may have been actual exiles, possibly believing Jews who were expelled from Rome and settled in Asia, modern-day Turkey, as colonists. There they would be foreigners to the locals, and exiled from where they came from. But Peter no doubt knew that all Christians would recognise themselves in these words. All Christians realise that once they are in the family of God, they no longer belong to this world, they no longer live for its values, chase its dreams, pursue its popularity. This has always been the position of God's people.

Abraham was a pilgrim. Israel experienced life as foreigners and pilgrims when slaves in Egypt, and then again, during the exile. The New Testament reminds us that all the great Old Testament heroes of the faith were pilgrims.

¹³ These all died in faith, not having received the promises, but having seen them afar off were assured of them, embraced *them* and confessed that they were strangers and pilgrims on the earth. ¹⁴ For those who say such things declare plainly that they seek a homeland. ¹⁵ And truly if they had called to mind that *country* from which they had come out, they would have had opportunity to return. ¹⁶ But now they desire a better, that is, a heavenly *country*. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for He has prepared a city for them. (Hebrews 11:13–16)

The Pilgrim's Progress is regarded by some as the second most published Christian book after the Bible. It has never been out of print since its first publication in 1678. Charles Spurgeon said he had read it over 100 times. It has sold over 250 million copies and been translated into 200 languages. It has come out in more than 1300 editions.

What is most remarkable about it is that it was written in prison. John Bunyan was a Baptist pastor in a time in England when it was illegal to preach if you were not part of the Anglican church. He was arrested and imprisoned, and could have been released at any time, if he agreed not to preach.

Bunyan: "All mankind are pilgrims; all are pressing through this world: the Christian willingly [accepts] that his life is a journey, because he is seeking a better country; but the greater [mass of people] are anxious to prevent [remembering this], that time is a preparation for eternity, and, [because] of this [refusal], they shudder when approaching the brink of the grave, into which they are irresistibly plunged."

People don't like to talk about, think about, speak about death, because it reminds them that life is a short journey from the womb to the tomb, from the cradle to the grave. But the Christian does not

shy away from this knowledge.

The whole letter assumes this is how believers understand themselves.

So, Peter now urges us, exhorts us, implores us, begs us as beloved pilgrims and strangers to stop doing some things and start doing others. Remove, and replace, put off and put on.

The negative is the call to abstain from fleshly lusts which war against the soul. This is a strong word which means to avoid contact, to totally abstain. Completely avoid fleshly lusts.

What are those? Actually, the word for lusts is used in the Bible for both sinful and for righteous desires. It simply means desires, inclinations, longings, loves. But the important thing here is these are fleshly.

Now you might think that fleshly means physical, bodily. So some might think Peter is saying abstain from sexual sin and sins of the body like drunkenness. Well, that is included, but that's not the whole picture. First of all, the body's desires and appetites in themselves are not sinful. They become sinful when employed in a way that rebels against God's order. Second of all, fleshly desires includes sins of the mind, of the heart, of the inner person. When Paul describes the works of the flesh in Galatians 5, it includes sins of the body, but listen to this list, because it includes other kinds too: ¹⁹ Now the works of the flesh are evident, which are: adultery, fornication, uncleanness, lewdness, ²⁰ idolatry, sorcery, hatred, contentions, jealousies, outbursts of wrath, selfish ambitions, dissensions, heresies, ²¹ envy, murders, drunkenness, revelries, and the like; of which I tell you beforehand, just as I also told *you* in time past, that those who practice such things will not inherit the kingdom of God. (Galatians 5:19–21)

A fleshly desire is a fallen desire. It is a desire that comes out of the corrupted human nature, the kind that wants to live independently of God, live for this world, and this life. So that definitely includes sins of sensuality, because if you are living for this world, and this life, then you don't respect God's laws of sex being within a covenant of marriage, you don't care if you're defiling the body with drink and drugs and gluttony. But fleshly desires include even darker sins, like pride, and envy, like character assassination, like hatred and gossip, sowing discord among others. Fleshly desires include the desire to keep up with the Joneses, be known and admired by others, accumulate wealth so as to accumulate envy and admiration from others.

Peter says these kinds of desires war against the soul, they attack and seek to conquer your soul. They are not peacefully residing inside you. No, they are aggressive, and they oppose the work God is doing in your soul as a pilgrim. So if that is the nature of these desires, what does that imply will happen to my soul if I allow them to grow, or even if I feed them? What does it look like if fleshly desires begin to win the war?

It looks like a fading desire for heaven. It looks like a spiritual numbness dulling our senses. It looks like a growing desire for the world, and a growing boredom with God's Word, God's people, God's mission. It looks like less spiritual discipline, less obedience, less commitment, less prayer. It looks like beginning to assimilate into the world system that is hostile to God, looking and seeming less like a pilgrim, and more like a citizen.

It isn't the ship in the water but water in the ship, which sinks ships. It isn't the Christian being in the world which wrecks their testimony. It's the world being in the Christian.

Pilgrims are distinct. And they are firstly distinct by what they don't do. They don't do some of the things with the body that the world does. They don't watch certain movies, or listen to certain music. They don't go to certain places. They don't join in certain conversations. They don't wear

certain things. They don't pursue certain business ventures. If the thought, thing, place, activity, wars against the soul, the Christian pilgrim, flees from it the way Joseph fled from Potiphar's wife.

One of the shortest commands of Jesus in the Gospel is three words: Remember Lot's wife. Lot's wife looked back at perishing Sodom, wishing to go back and was judged instantly.

If you're going to abstain from fleshly desires which war against your soul, you are going to have to treat it like a war. A war contains multiple strategies to defeat the enemy. When one battle is lost, you change the strategy, but the war goes on. You try many strategies, multiple so as to abstain from fleshly lusts. Sometimes the strategy is quoting Scripture right at the moment of temptation as Jesus did. But on another day, you need to include the strategy of removing the opportunity to sin, as Rom 13:14 say ¹⁴ But put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to fulfil *its* lusts. On another day you need to actually get out of the physical circumstance like Joseph did, flee temptation. On another day, you might need to cut off certain influences from the media, or from your social circle that are feeding that sin. On still another day, you need to pray and fast. Many Christians give up too easily, accepting defeat from desires that war against the soul.

Those desires are not going to stop warring against you, till the day you die. So you either become a skilled fighter, who employs all kinds of biblical strategies to abstain, or those desires will steadily erode your faith and love for God. John Owen said, "Do you mortify; do you make it your daily work; be always at it whilst you live; cease not a day from this work; be killing sin or it will be killing you."

The first ingredient of a powerful Christian testimony is deny the flesh.

II. Display Christ's Beauty

having your conduct honourable among the Gentiles

Here comes the positive, the thing we must do. In fact, this is closely bound to the abstaining command, a present participle.

Christianity is not meant to create a vacuum in your life, a hole, a gap where you used to do something, but now don't. Christianity is not a faith of negation, subtraction, deduction, as if there is some virtue purely in abstaining. No, we abstain because those things are deadly to faith, and then we replace them with honourable conduct among the Gentiles.

Gentiles here is not meant in the ethnic sense of non-Jews; it is meant in its more ethical, spiritual sense. God's people are God's holy nation, a royal priesthood, His own special people, and those who have not accepted Him are like Gentiles. The idea is unbelievers.

Having your conduct honourable among the unsaved. Conduct (anastrophe) is one of Peter's favourite words in this epistle. It means a way of life, a whole manner of living. We might say a lifestyle, a custom, even a culture. This is your whole belief system on display in your behaviours: your speech, your routines, your finances, your family relationships, your work ethic, your entertainment choices, your attitudes towards your neighbour, the poor and the suffering, your dress, your sexual purity, your disciplines.

Now the word Peter uses to describe Christian conduct here is interesting. It is translated honourable. It's the word *kalos* in Greek that was used to mean both what is good and what is beautiful. It's the word Plato uses when he discusses beauty at length in his writings. The idea is conduct that is ultimately beautiful to behold. Not in a visual sense of beautiful colours and

symmetries, but beautiful in its order, its balance, its discipline, its kindness and fairness. The whole of your behaviour when on display. It is the beauty of Christ in every area of your life.

Now of all the things Peter could have called on Christians to do in front of a Roman society that despised them and frowned upon them, he calls on them to live a life that would be regarded by any fair observer as honourable, excellent, lovely, beautiful, compelling.

What did he not call on the Christians to do? What strategy for commending Christianity did he not call for? Notice, he didn't tell his readers to begin a massive campaign of verbal self-defence, to engage the courts to sue people for libel or defamation, to write long tomes defending Christian morality. He says, maintain a beautiful, honourable, lovely, excellent life in front of the unbelievers. Why this approach and not an aggressive campaign of debate and defence?

Because what truly persuades the heart of people, is beauty.

Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven. (Matthew 5:16)

that you may become blameless and harmless, children of God without fault in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, among whom you shine as lights in the world, (Philippians 2:15)

Arguments can sometimes change people's minds, but they don't always move the heart. You can give someone a long list of evidences and reasons that Christianity is true, and they might partially agree with you, without embracing the faith. But when someone sees the beauty of the truth, they not only see its validity, they see its loveliness, its excellence, and they are persuaded.

Live a life that could justly be called a beautiful life. Not luxurious. Not ostentatious. Not materialistically refined and elegant. That's not what is commanded. A life that a fair-minded unbeliever could look at and say: that's a beautiful marriage, a beautiful family life. That's a beautifully run business. The worship of those Christians is beautiful. The way the young people date and court and get engaged is pure and beautiful. The way they use their time and money is beautiful. How they treat their widows, their sick, their grieving, their poor is beautiful.

“The Christians are distinguished from other men neither by country, nor language, nor the customs which they observe. For they neither inhabit cities of their own, nor employ a peculiar form of speech, nor lead a life which is marked out by any singularity.... They dwell in their own countries, but simply as sojourners. As citizens, they share in all things with others, and yet endure all things as if foreigners. ... They marry, as do all [others]; they beget children, but they do not destroy their offspring. They have a common table, but not a common bed. They are in the flesh, but they do not live after the flesh. They pass their days on earth, but they are citizens of heaven. They obey the prescribed laws, and at the same time surpass the laws by their lives. They love all men, and are persecuted by all. ..They are evil spoken of, and yet are justified; they are reviled, and bless; they are insulted, and repay the insult with honour; they do good, yet are punished as evil-doers. When punished, they rejoice as if quickened into life; they are assailed by the Jews as foreigners, and are persecuted by the Greeks; yet those who hate them are unable to assign any reason for their hatred. - Epistle to Diognetus, c. 130.

Now, if Christians like pilgrims deny fleshly desires, and display Christlike beauty, there is a third thing that makes up the power of a Christian testimony.

III. Draw Sinners to God

that when they speak against you as evildoers, they may, by *your* good works which they observe, glorify God in the day of visitation.

Peter anticipates two reactions. First, we should expect them to react to us negatively. No matter how beautiful, how godly, how exceptional the life, the initial response of unbelievers is going to be to speak against us. They will speak of Christians and Christianity as if we are the problem, as if we are the bad guys, the evil doers, as if what we are bringing into the world is harmful and destructive and negative. It's really amazing when you think about it.

The Roman Empire had a word for Christians: *malefactores* — evildoers. Christians called each other brother and sister and greeted with a holy kiss — they were accused of being incestuous. They gather for a feast where they were said to eat the body and drink the blood of Christ — they were accused of being cannibals. They weren't allowed their own buildings, so some of them began funeral societies and met at the graves, in Rome the catacombs under the city — which was considered weird and suspiciously secretive. Some Christians refused to serve in the Roman army, and all Christians refused to burn incense to Caesar — so they were accused of being traitors and disloyal.

Wilbur Smith “At first one would think that a religion which exalts and seeks to follow the only perfect and righteous man who has ever lived on this earth, who never harmed anyone, whose words delivered from superstition and fear, whose works redeemed from pain, and demons, and death, and hunger, who died because He loved us, and who always sought to bring men into communion with God, to bestow upon them eternal life and a home in heaven, one would have thought that such a character, and the religion which His life and work on earth established, would have been welcomed with open arms the first moment it was announced, and would,, never know opposition, or attack, or denunciation...But such has not been its history...In fact, the New Testament...testifies in the most startling way to the fact that Christ Himself was most viciously and constantly attacked, that His apostles suffered the same opposition, and that it was predicted by these very apostles that Christianity would continue so to suffer, down to the end of this age.” -

So Peter tells us, you will be maligned, you will be criticised. You will be called judgemental, critical, arrogant, hypocrites, delusional, crazy, cultic. That will be the first reaction. Expect it. Don't be shocked and surprised when it happens. “²⁶ Woe to you when all men speak well of you, For so did their fathers to the false prophets. (Luke 6:26)

However, the second reaction will come as they observe your good works. Again, it's that same word: *kalos*, beautiful. As they behold the beauty of Christ in your life, something else may happen with some of them. They recognise the difference. Peter knows that even the non-Christian values of his culture overlap in some ways with those of the Christian faith. In God's common grace, even unbelievers can be compelled to admit that the lifestyle of believers is morally beautiful.

Think of how beautiful Daniel's life was, as he lived as a pilgrim and stranger in a foreign land. The satraps jealous of him sought to find *some* charge against Daniel “but they could find no charge or fault, because he *was* faithful; nor was there any error or fault found in him. (Daniel 6:4) Daniel, ultimately thrown unfairly into a lion's den, and then protected and rescued and vindicated, became the means of a pagan king glorifying God **"He is the living God and he endures forever"**

How do you do that? What do I do with the criticism, how do I respond when they call me a bigot or a fool, how do I not grow cold or defensive? Remember your position in Christ. By God's grace, I am a pilgrim. Whatever they may say about me in this moment, I know that by God's grace I am his child, I belong to Him, I am headed to my home. My practice flows out of my position. First

who I am by grace, then what I do. Good works are the fruit of my faith, not the root.

Peter says, they will glorify God in the day of visitation. The day of visitation refers to God drawing near. It's a word used to mean an official visit. This usually refers to God arriving in judgement, though it can also refer to Him arriving in mercy, Zecharias uses this in his praise of God speaking of Messiah soon to be born.

The point is that these unbelievers will glorify God, which seems to mean they will thank and praise God, on the day of judgement. Why would they do that? Most likely because they had been converted, after seeing the testimony of these Christians. Beholding the beautiful lives of Christians, their slander and malice against Christians turned into repentance and faith. And one day, on the day of visitation, they will praise God for intervening in their lives by sending some Christians across their path.

There is a turnaround from false accusations, to recognising the goodness and beauty of your life.

having a good conscience, that when they defame you as evildoers, those who revile your good conduct in Christ may be ashamed. (1 Peter 3:16)

⁸ sound speech that cannot be condemned, that one who is an opponent may be ashamed, having nothing evil to say of you. (Titus 2:8)

People are not saved by our testimonies; they are saved by the grace of God, intervening in our lives. But one of the means God uses to save people is the testimony of His people.

Perhaps you are one who became a Christian who saw something in another that you found compelling. It was mysteriously beautiful, unusual, even inexplicable. Forgiveness in the face of great abuse; patience and endurance when others would have given up, a sweet and calm spirit when others were fretting, a genuine contentedness when so many were murmuring, a distinct purity amidst a sea of moral filth, a clear voice of truth, amidst the noise of false ideas. But it melted some hardness in you, it warmed something that was cold to God, it re-sensitised something that was numb and unfeeling. God used the beauty of Christ in another's life to draw you.

The Scottish preacher Alexander Maclaren said. "The world takes its notions of God, most of all, from the people who say that they belong to God's family. They read us a great deal more than they read the Bible. They see us; they only hear about Jesus Christ."

Our lives preach. Our testimonies say more than many sermons.

In the summer of 1805, a number of Native American chiefs and warriors met in council at Buffalo Creek, New York to hear a presentation of the Christian message by a Mr. Cram from the Boston Missionary Society. After the sermon, a response was given by Red Jacket, one of the leading chiefs. Among other things, the chief said: "Brother, we are told that you have been preaching to the white people in this place. These people are our neighbours. We are acquainted with them. We will wait a little while and see what effect your preaching has upon them. If we find it does them good, makes them honest and less disposed to cheat Indians, we will then consider again of what you have said."

They may not cheer you on tomorrow. But amidst the slanderers and naysayers and mockers of Christianity will be a few who are convicted. Indeed, such were some of you. And the beauty of Christ was irrefutable, undeniable, inarguable, unassailable, eventually, irresistible. You were persuaded, not by reasons and arguments alone, but by beautiful works that led you to their source.

Everyone is a pilgrim, on the march from birth till death, about to enter eternity. Christians admit this, and have chosen to walk the narrow path that leads to Heaven. Wide and broad is the way to destruction, said Jesus, and there are many on it. Narrow is the way to Heaven, and there are few on it. But it is open to you.

What about you, sitting on the fence, halfway between the world and the church? You who are trying to hedge your bets and have a foot in both places. It simply doesn't work that way. The Lord Jesus did not give half of Himself for you on the cross. He gave it all, took the full penalty of sin in Himself, so that whoever receives Him, receives new life, a new start, new righteousness. But you must receive the whole Christ, by surrendering wholly. No games with God.

Leave the world, leave living for self, come to Christ, become His pilgrim, and live the beautiful life, inwardly and outwardly.

Christian, what does your testimony say? Does it say you had continually denied the desires rooted in this rebellious world – denied the flesh? Does it consistently display the beauty of Christ, conduct of a citizen of another world, a holy kingdom, a beautiful country, the country of Christ? If so, then like Perpetua whose life converted Pudens, you will very likely draw sinners to God, you will likely end up being part of the reason someone comes to Christ and embraces Him.