

1 Peter 2:11-25 “Abstain from Evil. Act with Integrity.”¹

Prepare the Lesson: Prepare to show the 5-minute video segment of an interview about slavery in New Testament days: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BttRfWc3Xoc> . Make copies of the handout of quotes from In His Steps for the Transformational Exercise.

Fellowship question: (Use *one* of these to break the ice, to begin some discussion and lead into the study):

If you could have lived at any time in our American history, and you had the same economic and familial status as you have now, when would it have been?

Imagine you live in the America of two hundred years ago. You have the same economic and familial status as you have now. Where would you want to live? The north with its commerce and universities? The south with its natural beauty and “laid back” atmosphere? The west with the challenges and rewards of the frontier?

Information

- Have a class member read 1 Peter 2:11-12.

Peter calls Christians “aliens and exiles.” Another way to translate this might be “immigrants and refugees.” What is the difference between these categories of “foreigners?” What do they have in common? (an immigrant lives in a land by choice; a refugee is forced away from a homeland that they probably would like to return to; both are living in a new culture, etc.)

Do you think Peter would say the same if he were writing to the 21st century American church? Are we “aliens and exiles” in our culture?

Peter is not speaking politically here – about nationality or ethnicity. Indeed, just a few verses ahead of this he says that Christians are of an entirely different nature than politicians would make with borders or skin color.

- Have a class member read 1 Peter 2:9.

To Peter, there is no race or religion or nationality that trumps our identity in Christ. Part of this may be seen in the way Peter labels the non-Christian – as Gentiles. This was the word used to describe non-Jews, normally. Now, there are Jesus-believers and there are Gentiles.

According to verse 12, how are believers to live among the Gentiles? (honorably, with good works, etc.)

¹ This lesson is copyrighted by Dr. Rick Jordan, Great Bible Teachers, Inc, 2023. More lessons may be found at greatbibleteachers.com.

“The word ‘honest’ [honorable, NRSV] ... speaks of goodness which is beautiful, an outward goodness that strikes the eye. Alford translates it ‘comely’. Robertson, ‘seemly’. ... We give others an honest testimony and picture of what we really are inwardly.”²

Peter is talking about integrity. *Who we are* on the inside guides *what we do* on the outside. Having goodness, we do good works. Having the Spirit, we bear fruit of the Spirit.

The spiritual life has two sides to the coin. We abstain. We act. [Write on the board: Abstain from evil. Act with integrity.]

To act with integrity is to be in sync with Jesus’s life and teachings. We are “little Christs” (“Christ-ians”) when we live consistently according to the way Jesus taught us to love and live.

Here, Peter tells us to abstain from what? To what purpose?

Peter tells us to act with integrity. To what purpose? (We are good, not to impress God or get stuff from God (like, Heaven!), but so our goodness will impress those who live in the evil.)

Some churches focus on abstaining from evil – no smoking, drinking, cursing, sex before marriage, etc. This type of spirituality is relatively easy to measure quantitatively. Either you do or you don’t. The more difficult measure of spirituality is the qualitative measure.

This has to do with a growing spiritual maturity that leads to good works. For example, a person grows more generous or more hospitable or more wise. The actions that come from this growth may be measurable (how much more did they give, how many persons did they have over for meals, etc.).

Once I was riding on the Metro in Atlanta. A man entered carrying signs with threatening religious slogans. He was a street preacher. I struck up a conversation with him, asking him how he began, what he hoped to accomplish in the few minutes someone might listen to him, etc. Then, he asked me questions about my spiritual life. “Have you been saved from your sin? Have you been saved from the torments of Hell?” I assured him that my faith was in Jesus Christ, then I added, “I am saved from, but also saved to.” He asked, “What do you mean?” I said, “I am saved to love others, saved to serve others, saved to make the world a better place. I am saved from but I am also saved to.” He paused, then said, “That’s pretty good. I may use that.”

Where did Peter get this idea? He heard it from Jesus!

- Have a class member read Matthew 5:16.

As we abstain from evil, we also actively live a life of integrity that leads to good works, Peter continues.

² Kenneth S. Wuest, *First Peter in the Greek New Testament for the English Reader* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1963), 59.

- Have a class member read 1 Peter 2:13-17.

As spiritual immigrants/refugees, we live in a “foreign” culture. How are we to live when we have people above us in authority? (We abstain from evil. Our life leads to good works.)

“The emperor...is to be honored, though not revered...[we are not] to worship the emperor by offering incense and saying, ‘Caesar is Lord!’”³

How can we have godly respect for those over us in authority without making them “lord?”

Now, we get to the part about slavery.

- Have a class member read 1 Peter 2:18-21.

“Given the reality that NT letters were read aloud to groups of people, every indication is that some slaves (male and female) and masters (male and female) were together in the same churches when 1 Peter was read. Regardless of the different stations in life, slaves, masters, men, and women are to be considered equal, as we see in Galatians 3:28 (‘There is neither Jew nor Gentile, slave nor free, nor is there male or female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus’). And as Peter says, all are ‘God’s slaves’ (2:16).”⁴

No matter when you lived in American history, if you were in the middle or upper class, until 150 or so years ago, you would probably have owned at least one slave. Even today, there are slaves or near-slaves in our country, though it is not legal, as it once was.

I’m going to ask you to ponder this question before I open the time for answering: Why don’t you own a slave?

Talk with your neighbors and come up with as many reasons as you can that you/they do not own a slave. Be as serious or as outrageous as you want in your answers.

[Pause for group discussions. Call back together and ask the question again, “Why don’t you own a slave?” Take one answer at a time from each group until all different answers are given. Write answers on the board as they are given.]

How did you feel when you first heard this question? Why?

In today’s text, slaves are addressed. That is, the author of 1 Peter speaks directly to slaves who are members of the churches in Asia Minor (modern day Turkey.)

³ Tony Cartledge, “Paradoxical Living,” *Nurturing Faith*, May 11, 2014.

⁴Dennis R. Edwards, *1 Peter*, The Story of God Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2017), 116.

What he says to slaves is not what Sojourner Truth or Frederick Douglas or much later, Martin Luther King, Jr. would say to oppressed people. It is not a liberator's message. But it is a message we have in our Bible. Peter is not going to address slavery as a system. He is going to speak to slaves who claim Christ as their ultimate Lord and Master.

Slavery was a reality of the day. They were treated no better than American slaves were.

[Show 5-minute interview segment with Mitzi Smith about slavery in New Testament times. Play 30:26-35:40: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BttRfWc3Xoc>]

“Slavery in first century Roman society was no less cruel and inhumane than in any other society. Ancient Roman slavery was a self-serving institution in every respect.”⁵

Who has less authority than a slave? (no one!)

Overall, Christians had very little to no authority in Roman society, either. There was no way, practically speaking, for a handful of Christians to overturn this massive system, least of all Christians who were slaves.

So, how should Christians who happened to be slaves live? Abstain from evil. Act with integrity.

There is at least one significant difference between Roman slavery and American slavery, however. Most of those who captured, sold, bought and abused slaves in our land claimed to be Christian. Because of this, some African-Americans did not trust their masters' interpretation of scriptures such as this one or others in Paul's writings or in the parables.

“An ex-slave woman revealed that when her experience negated certain oppressive interpretations of the Bible given by White preachers, she, through engaging the biblical message for herself, rejected them. Consequently, she also dismissed White preachers who distorted the message in order to maintain slavery. Her grandson, Howard Thurman, speaks of her use of the Bible this way: ‘During the days of slavery,’ she said, ‘the master’s minister would occasionally hold services for the slaves. Always the white minister used as his text something from Paul. ‘Slaves be obedient to them that are your masters...as unto Christ.’ Then he would go on to show how, if we were good and happy slaves, God would bless us. I promised my Maker that if I ever learned to read and if freedom ever came, I would not read that part of the Bible.’”⁶

⁵ Mitzi J. Smith, “Slavery in the Early Church”, in *True to Our Native Land: An African American New Testament Commentary*, ed Brian K. Blount (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007), 19.

⁶ Jacquelyn Grant, “White Woman’s Jesus and Black Woman’s Christ: Feminist Christology and Womanist Response”, in *Christian Social Teachings: A Reader in Christian Social Ethics from the Bible to the Present*, ed George W. Forell (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2013), 331f.

How would you feel about this type of passage in the Bible if you were this American slave woman? As Christians who are (probably) middle-class, what is our role in “setting the captive free?” Or, are we part of the problem with modern day slavery?

“Slavery in the Roman world was perhaps the most pernicious and pervasive social evil facing the early church and modern Christians are right to be concerned that slavery was not ‘pinged’ by the moral radar of the earliest Christians. Yet there are also clear indicators that the Christian faith as articulated by Paul and other NT writers could not coexist with the institution of slavery. Paul’s vision of the church as community in which ‘slave and free’ were obsolete categories (Gal 3:28) was not conducive to the institution of slavery. To the extent that this vision of humanity affected the larger society – and it did - slavery would become increasingly untenable.”⁷

- Have a class member read 1 Peter 2:21-25.

In spite of the taint of this being in the paragraph addressed to slaves, this is a beautiful portrait of Jesus Christ as he abstained from evil and acted with integrity.

Transformational Exercise

[Distribute the *Quotes from In His Steps* handout.]

[Explain the plot of this novel. The following is taken from Wikipedia.⁸]

The novel begins on a Friday morning when a man out of work (later identified as Jack Manning) appears at the front door of the Reverend Henry Maxwell while the latter is preparing for that Sunday's upcoming sermon. Maxwell listens to the man's helpless plea briefly before brushing him away and closing the door. The same man appears in church at the end of the Sunday sermon, walks up to "the open space in front of the pulpit," and faces the people. No one stops him. He quietly but frankly confronts the congregation—"I'm not complaining; just stating facts."—about their compassion, or apathetic lack thereof, for the jobless like him in Raymond. Upon finishing his address to the congregation, he collapses, and dies a few days later.

That next Sunday, Henry Maxwell, deeply moved by the events of the past week, presents a challenge to his congregation: "Do not do anything without first asking, 'What would Jesus do?'" This challenge is the theme of the novel and is the driving force of the plot. From this point on, the rest of the novel consists of certain episodes that focus on individual characters as their lives are transformed by the challenge.

In silence, read these quotations from this book. Which of the quotations speaks to you?

[Close in a prayer something like this:] *Set us free, O God, from anything that keeps us from following in your steps. Help us to abstain from evil and to act with integrity in this week. Amen.*

⁷ Moyer V. Hubbard, *Christianity in the Greco-Roman World: A Narrative Introduction* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2010), 225.

⁸ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/In_His_Steps accessed 7/31/2023.

Quotes from *In His Steps* by Charles M. Sheldon

In His Steps is a best-selling religious fiction novel. First published in 1896, the book has sold more than 50,000,000 copies, and ranks as one of the best selling books of all time. The full title of the book is *In His Steps: What Would Jesus Do?*

The greatest question in all of human life is summed up when we ask, 'What would Jesus do?' if, as we ask it, we also try to answer it from a growth in knowledge of Jesus himself. We must know Jesus before we can imitate Him.

But if our definition of being a Christian is simply to enjoy the privileges of worship, be generous at no expense to ourselves, have a good, easy time surrounded by pleasant friends and by comfortable things, live respectably and at the same time avoid the world's great stress of sin and trouble because it is too much pain to bear it—if this is our definition of Christianity, surely we are a long way from following the steps of Him who trod the way with groans and tears and sobs of anguish for a lost humanity; who sweat, as it were, great drops of blood, who cried out on the upreared cross, 'My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?'

The Christianity that attempts to suffer by proxy is not the Christianity of Christ.

After we have asked the Spirit to tell us what Jesus would do and have received an answer to it, we are to act regardless of the results to ourselves.

There was almost general consent over the fact that the application of the Christ spirit and practice to the everyday life was the serious thing. It required a knowledge of Him and an insight into His motives that most of them did not yet possess.

Our motto will be, 'What would Jesus do?' Our aim will be to act just as He would if He was in our places, regardless of immediate results. In other words, we propose to follow Jesus' steps as closely and as literally as we believe He taught His disciples to do. And those who volunteer to do this will pledge themselves for an entire year, beginning with today, so to act.

What is it to be a follower of Jesus? What does it mean to imitate Him? What does it mean to walk in His steps?