

Before reading:

Peter addressed his first letter (ch 1 v 1)

To *God's elect, strangers in the world, ... 2* who have been *chosen...for obedience to Jesus Christ...*

3 'Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy *he has given us new birth* into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead...'

We heard more about this new birth in 1:23, and we said then that it was crucial; many people struggle to live the Christian life because they have not been born again; no wonder they struggle; they can't live as 'aliens and strangers to the world' because they are still part of the world; they think as the world thinks.

2:4 'As you come to him, (Jesus), the living Stone (not Greek 'Petros' jagged stone, but 'Lithos' meaning a shaped, smooth stone - one of you told me afterwards that the old method of printing called 'lithography' used an ultra smooth, polished stone to take the image to be transferred to the paper -

4 As you come to him, the living Stone... 5 you also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.

So Peter goes on to remind these Christians of who they are as people born again in Christ, and how to live as that. We'll hear in v11,12 the general principle, then a list of worked examples; starting with obeying the civil authority.

(we'll save up the sections addressed to slaves, wives and husbands for another time.

Reading Here is Stuart to read in from v9 1 Peter 2: 9-17

9 [But] you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light.

10 Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.

11 Dear friends, I urge you, as aliens and strangers in the world, to abstain from sinful desires, which war against your soul.

12 Live such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us.

13 Submit yourselves for the Lord's sake to *every authority instituted among men*: whether to the king, as the supreme authority,

14 or to governors, who are sent by him to punish those who do wrong and to commend those who do right.

15 For it is God's will that by doing good you should silence the ignorant talk of foolish men.

16 Live as free men, but do not use your freedom as a cover-up for evil; live as servants of God.

17 Show proper respect to everyone: Love the brotherhood of believers, fear God, honour the king.

The examples continue:18 Slaves...3:1 wives...3:7 husbands

Sermon starts here Freedom as servants

There are two ways to think about freedom.

1 The typical teenage way is to rebel against the restrictions placed on them by parents, school teachers and the law.

It is some time since I traveled on a bus filled mainly with schoolpupils, but I was amazed at the bad language. Free of adult restraint, some of them push the boundaries of propriety.

The temptation to experiment with alcohol, below the legal age, or drugs, arises from this desire for freedom, freedom to do whatever I like, freedom from rules set by others.

The disconcerting news of a 13-year-old boy becoming a father, with a 15 year old girl as mother would be another example of people wanting to be what they are not.

Adults are not exempt. I suspect many who play sport did so, at least at one stage, wanting to be more than they are, more skilful, more successful, more famous... more rich?

But all these attempts at freedom are examples of a journey in the wrong direction. They start from a position of not being free, and hope to reach freedom. They do not free us from temptation, or bad habits, or guilt.

The Christian has an entirely different journey in mind.

V 9 and 10 talk about who we have become in Christ.

You are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God.

God has called us out of darkness into his wonderful light; so we declare his praises. That's where we start.

We have been changed into something quite different from what we were.

Now, says God through Peter, be what I have made you. Live as people who already belong to me, live as people who think as I do, not as the world does.

'Aliens and strangers in the world' does not mean that we cease to be human. Like everyone else, we need to eat, sleep, work - to earn a living and contribute to society; we still need a roof over our heads and the means to acquire it.

It is the mindset that is different.

When we know that Christ has joined us to himself, and made us his people, we do not strive to earn or achieve closeness to him; we accept it, and live prayerfully on the basis it is already true, soaking up his will by reading his Word.

So v11 we abstain from sinful desires, which war against our souls. Desires that try to make us act as natives of earth, rather than as visitors here whose ultimate home is heaven.

Notice, this is not an endorsement of monasticism, with poverty and celibacy and the like. Peter does not tell us to renounce material possessions; you can be poor, but if you're desperate for riches, you are still a slave to money.

[Conversely, it is possible to be rich, and choose to sit light to material things by giving away as much as you can.]

Nor to impose celibacy; Many a man who outwardly abstains from sex has been tormented with incessant sexual temptation. A slave to passions and desires.

The *desire* for financial gain, or for sexual conquest, or being king of the castle - these are some of the passions that war against our souls.

Being accepted by Christ, we don't need any more status. We are part of a royal priesthood.

'JB Phillips, in his Introduction to 'Letters to young churches' remarks: 'To the writers of these letters this life was only an incident. It was lived, with a due sense of responsibility, as a preface to sharing the timeless life of God himself. They trained themselves... and attempted to train others, not to be 'taken in' by this world, not to give their hearts to it, not to conform to its values, but to remember constantly that they were only temporary residents, and that their rights of citizenship were in the unseen world of reality.' Quoted in J Philip Notes.

Being aliens and strangers on earth does not, however, exclude us from responsibility in this life:

2 - The other kind of freedom

While non-Christians hunt for freedom, we know the secret of it: live life in such a way that it brings glory to God. V12 Live such good lives among the pagans that, (though they may accuse you of doing wrong) they may see your good deeds, and glorify God on the day he visits us.

Peter is simply quoting his Master here: Matt 5:16 Jesus near start of sermon on Mt: let your light shine before men, that they may see *your* good deeds - and praise your *Father in heaven*

If we do good by our own efforts, trying to achieve a place in God's favour, we want the credit for ourselves. But if the good we do is merely letting God's goodness out, the glory goes to him, not us. So Jesus can go on to say Matt 6:1 'Be careful not to do your acts of righteousness before men, to be seen by them. When you give to the needy, do not announce it with trumpets... but give in secret. When you pray, do it in private; your Father knows what you need before you ask him.'

This is what lies at the back of Paul's doxology in Ephesians 3: 20, Glory to God, who is able to do so much more than we can ask, or even imagine... God's habit of doing that is what brings more and more glory to him.

Christians often find themselves accused of wrongdoing, unjustly. Paul (and Silas) set free a demon-possessed slave girl in Philippi, and ended up in jail because of it, mercilessly beaten, with their feet in the stocks. When it turned out they were Roman citizens, and the punishment was utterly illegal, the authorities were going to let them go, quietly, but Paul said, 'not likely, let them come and escort them out.' They had to admit they had been wrong to punish these adherents of the new religion, who were doing good, not evil.

If you tell the truth at work, someone will feel embarrassed and may start to tell untruths about you.

In v 13, Peter begins a series of examples of Christians living good lives in an alien world.

Submit yourselves *for the Lord's sake* to every authority instituted among men; Submit... whether to the king, as the supreme authority, or to governors, who are sent by him to punish those who do wrong and to commend those who do right. Some speed cameras say 'your speed, 29, smiley face' - very good. Balance punish/commend

Two ways of understanding 'for the Lord's sake':

a) Because Christians have accepted Jesus as their Lord, we obey *him*; and here he is telling us that human government exists in general as an institution that God invented.

This is not a blanket approval of every king, or policy; kings too have to answer to God for their actions (cf Old Testament). Rather, for the sake of Jesus, we are to be law-abiding citizens.

Nor does it imply that every Government official is incapable of wrongdoing. It says, having a police force to keep law and order is a godly thing; even if some police officers do not always keep the law themselves. On the other hand, some officers are themselves Christians, serving God / ministry.

Being law-abiding applies to big laws like murder and theft; and to human arrangements like 'keep left at roundabouts', and drive safely, which includes 'staying within the speed limits'.

Not because of speed cameras, but for the Lord's sake.

b) second meaning of 'for the Lord's sake' could be, as long as the authority commands what is right in God's eyes.

This approach can be seen in people who engage in campaigns of *civil disobedience*. Maybe over Nuclear weapons, or what they think of as the rights of animals.

I'm ill at ease with this approach, because I live in a generally law-abiding democracy. I don't see the need to sit in the road to block the traffic. We have other ways to vote for change. I don't see the point in going to jail for not paying a fine for breaking the law. If you want to deplete what the Government spends on nuclear weapons, you can gift aid your donations to CND and let them reclaim the tax you paid. That seems to me a legitimate method of protest, that is entirely within the law.

What about *whistle-blowing*?

We heard on Radio 4 yesterday how a worker at GCHQ passed on an email asking staff to spy on countries that were failing to support the USA in planning war on Iraq. It reached the Observer newspaper. She confessed and lost her job for breaking the Official Secrets Act.

I couldn't help thinking, they punished the wrong person. What options had she? If she'd protested internally, the senior people who commanded this deceitful act might have been the ones to suffer. If supervisors had failed to correct this illegal command, she could have protested over their heads, within the service.

Maybe, in the end, she might have had no sanction left except to go outwith the service; but that could still have been to go to the police, the Prime Minister, the Queen, not the newspapers.

Christians acknowledge the duty to keep the law. Two wrongs don't make a right.

15 it is God's will you should silence the ignorant talk of foolish men.

16 Live as free men, but do not use our freedom as a cover-up for evil; *live* as servants of God. Show proper *respect* to everyone. *Love* the brotherhood of believers, *fear* God, *honour* the king.

Here is the kind of freedom Christians enjoy.

Not a striving to become free, but enjoying the freedom of being servants of God.

We are loved and valued, people for whom Christ gave his very life,

No wonder we serve our Saviour.

No wonder we value other people as fellow creatures, made in the image of God.
No wonder we have extra love for our fellow Christians. We are joint heirs with them of Christ's kingdom.

So you have two kinds of freedom;
The illusory one where you desperately search for a way out of bondage to sin, habits, the darkness of living in God's world without God;

Or the glorious freedom of the children of God, truly free because we have accepted a place as willing subjects of Christ.

King of kings, ... we live to serve your majesty.