

The letter of 1 Peter is addressed to Christians who lived in a time and place where people were openly persecuted because they followed Jesus. Jesus’ teachings tend to turn the status quo on its head, and push those who are at home in this world to the limits of their comfort zones. Peter calls these early Christians *foreigners and exiles* in verse 11, reminding them that this world is not their true home.

The same is true for us. We live as people who are temporarily part of this world; and while we’re here, it’s important to live in it fully, just as Jesus did. But we cannot make this world our place of true belonging. The solid earth under our feet can only give us a false sense of permanence.

But being the creatures we are, we busy ourselves day in and day out, putting down roots in one way or another. Whether it is a home we cannot imagine leaving, a job that tells us who we are, or a community that defines the traditions that shape our lives, we look for whatever it is we have that can help us say to ourselves and the world: “This is who I am, and this is where I belong.”

Trying to make this temporary world our true home is the source of some of our deepest grief. Whenever we hold onto created things and make these things the reason we live, we bring a lot of anxiety and uncertainty into our lives.

No matter how much we might wish it were different, we too are foreigners and people in exile. Whether we have moved from place to place or stayed in one area all of our lives, we still are living apart from our true home. That means the things of this world cannot give us life or keep us safe; neither can they tell us who we are or why we exist.

So what do we do when the familiar can be taken away, when those things that mean so much to us can be changed by time and circumstance? Death, divorce, loss of a job or home, an unexpected diagnosis, a friendship torn apart by misunderstanding that we thought would last forever. When these kinds of things happen, what is there that makes it possible to not only keep on going, but to live in a way that is satisfying and worthwhile?

The first people to read Peter’s letter would have known this kind of struggle. Persecuted for their faith, they would have understood the grief of those who find themselves living in a world that has turned out to be less than hospitable they had hoped.

There is no way we humans can build a place of permanence for ourselves—not in this life or ever. We only drive ourselves to frustration and hopelessness by trying. But we know the One who can do everything that we cannot. Peter’s words to the foreigners and exiles of his time echo through the ages, their counsel is sure and true. They take careful aim and find the center mark in our own restless and grieving hearts: *Put your hope in Jesus.*

We exiles need a home and our one true place in this life is standing in the light of Christ, following the Good Shepherd, trusting the One who so willingly gave up everything for us. Our one true place of belonging is in the heart of God.

The church is a visible sign of God's kingdom. It's not a perfect place, but still, here there is grace and here there is hope and here there are signs of new life. That is God's good gift to God's people in exile until it's time to bring us home. This unique collection of people will never be in this place to worship God again. God brought this congregation together to worship and serve him today. It is good that we are in this place today. Any place that we are is a good place to be, for we are always living in the presence of God. In Jesus Christ, we have received all the mercy and courage for living that we will ever need.

On Thursday morning at our staff meeting I admitted that this Scripture has about 5 sermons in it and I was struggling to find the sermon that I should preach today. I decided that verse 17 contained the heart of Peter's message and it contains what William Barclay said is what we might call "a four-point summary of Christian duty." These are the four points:\*

1. "*Show proper respect to everyone.*" To us this may seem hardly needing to be said; but when Peter wrote this letter it was something quite new. There were 60,000,000 slaves in the Roman Empire, every one of whom was considered by law to be, not a person, but a thing, with no rights whatever. Barclay suggests that Peter is saying, "Remember the rights of human [beings] and the dignity of every person." Of course it is still possible today to treat people as things. An employer may treat employees like so many machines for producing so much work. When we regard anyone as existing solely to minister to our comfort or to further our plans, we are in effect regarding them, not as persons, but as things. The most tragic thing is when we come to regard those who are nearest and dearest to us as existing for our convenience—and to treat them as things.

2. "*Love the family of believers.*" Within the Christian community a respect for every person turns into something warmer and closer; it turns into love. The dominant climate of the Church must always be love. One of the truest definitions of the Church is that it is "the extension of the family." The Church is the larger family of God and the glue that holds it together must be love.

3. "*Fear God.*" We heard in last week's Scripture Peter's injunction to "*live out your time as foreigners here in reverent fear*" (1:17). Proverbs 1:7 says, "*The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge.*" It may well be that the translation should be, not that the fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge but that the fear of the Lord is the very foundation of knowledge. As I said last Sunday, *fear* in the Hebrew does not mean terror; but it does mean respect for God's awesome power, the power that raised Jesus from the dead. It is only when God is given his proper place in our lives that all other relationships take their proper place.

4. "*Honor the emperor.*" Of the four imperatives in this verse, this one is the most [shocking]. If it was really Peter the fisherman who wrote this letter, the king in question is none other than Nero. It is the teaching of the New Testament that the ruler is sent by God to preserve order among people and that he or she must be respected, even when he is Nero.

Then, in the very last verse of this chapter (v. 25) we come upon two of the greatest biblical names for God—the Shepherd and Overseer of our souls. God is the Shepherd of our souls. This is one of the oldest descriptions of God. We find it in the best-loved of all the Psalms: "*The Lord is my shepherd*" (Psalm 23). But this was also a title which Jesus took to himself when he called himself the "Good Shepherd" and when he said that the Good Shepherd lays down his life for the sheep (John 10). To Jesus the men and

women who did not know God and who were waiting for what he could give them were like sheep without a shepherd (Mark 6:34).

The word “shepherd” vividly depicts the ceaseless vigilance and the self-sacrificing love of God for his flock. “*We are his people and the sheep of his pasture*” says Psalm 100. The shepherd’s psalm, Psalm 23, also says God’s goodness and love will follow us. The word “follow” literally means “pursue.” *The Message* translates it this way: “*Your beauty and love chase after me every day of my life.*” For those who have put their faith in Jesus, we have been given much more than we deserve and we have more than we need. That’s God’s goodness in action. Peter asks us to show the goodness of God by showing “proper respect” to everyone.

His goodness and mercy led Jesus to the Cross, where the Shepherd gave his life for his sheep. Why does the Lord do all of this for us? His motive is to display the honor of his name. It brings him great pleasure to overflow in goodness and love toward needy sheep-like people.

In fact, he is pursuing us right now in order to give us more than we need and more than we deserve. To God be the glory forever! Amen.

*\*The Letters of James and Peter* by William Barclay. The Westminster Press © 1976, p.208-209.