

Aliens and Exiles (1 Peter 2:11-3:7)

11 Dear friends, I urge you, as foreigners and exiles, to abstain from sinful desires, which wage 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 human authority: whether to the emperor, 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 people. 16 Live as free people, but do not use your freedom as a cover-up for evil; live as God's slaves. 17 Show proper respect to everyone, love the family of believers, fear God, honour the emperor.

18 Slaves, in reverent fear of God submit yourselves to your masters, not only to those who are good and considerate, but also to those who are harsh. 19 For it is commendable if someone bears up under the pain of unjust suffering because they are conscious of God. 20 But how is it to your credit if you receive a beating for doing wrong and endure it? But if you suffer for doing good and you endure it, this is commendable before God.

21 To this you were called, because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps. 22 'He committed no sin, and no deceit was found in his mouth.' 23 When they hurled their insults at him, he did not retaliate; when he suffered, he made no threats. Instead, he entrusted himself to him who judges justly. 24 'He himself bore our sins' in his body on the cross, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness; "by his wounds you have been healed.' 25 For 'you were like sheep going astray,' but now you have returned to the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls.

1 Wives, in the same way submit yourselves to your own husbands so that, if any of them do not believe the word, they may be won over without words by the behaviour of their wives, 2 when they see the purity and reverence of your lives. 3 Your beauty should not come from outward adornment, such as elaborate hairstyles and the wearing of gold jewellery or fine clothes. 4 Rather, it should be that of your inner self, the unfading beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit, which is of great worth in God's sight. 5 For this is the way the holy women of the past who put their hope in God used to adorn themselves. They submitted themselves to their own husbands, 6 like Sarah, who obeyed Abraham and called him her lord. You are her daughters if you do what is right and do not give way to fear.

7 Husbands, in the same way be considerate as you live with your wives, and treat them with respect as the weaker partner and as heirs with you of the gracious gift of life, so that nothing will hinder your prayers.

1. In this section of his letter, Peter continues to advocate behaviour that should mark out followers of Jesus in a world in which they are a minority. In the previous verses he has urged them to root out attitudes and ways of speaking that cause damage to the Christian community itself. Now he focuses on how they should behave in the world outside the church. How are they to behave, especially towards the civic authorities, slave-owners and their pagan husbands or wives?

2. Notice the terms ‘foreigners and exiles’ again (2:11). They live in a society with structures, expectations and practices that are alien to God’s kingdom. As a minority community, they are in no position to challenge these directly, but they should not endorse these uncritically. They need to find a way to live faithfully and peacefully.

3. Peter suggests two motives for this: it will save them from unnecessary suffering (2:20) and it will also be a good witness to outsiders (2:12).

4. The three features of Roman society Peter addresses here are:

(a) Imperialism (2:13-17) – a system of government that was ruthless, unaccountable and demanded total loyalty.

(b) Slavery (2:18-20) – an economic system that treated large numbers of men and women as property, rather than people, and denied them freedom and dignity.

(c) Patriarchy (3:1-7) – a cultural system that valued men more highly than women and gave husbands licence to dominate and oppress their wives.

5. ***How does Peter encourage them to live in this kind of society?*** This passage can be interpreted in different ways – and has been throughout history.

6. When the church was influential and allied with the wealthy and powerful, as it was for hundreds of years in Europe, these verses were interpreted in ways that did not challenge the status quo. Absolute monarchy, slavery and patriarchy were defended as God’s intention and Christians were expected to endorse these practices.

7. And, even though we are now a minority community of aliens and exiles, this way of reading these verses has left a legacy so that we are in danger of misunderstanding them and missing their subversive power.

8. At first glance this traditional reading seems appropriate. Several times Peter tells his readers to ‘submit’ – to the authorities, to slave-masters, to husbands – to respect them, to accept unjust treatment without complaining.

9. This may involve suffering, but Peter points them to the example of Jesus, who also suffered unjustly and chose not to complain or retaliate (2:23). Just as Jesus entrusted himself to God as the just judge, so they are to do the same.

10. But dig a bit deeper and all kinds of subversive elements appear:

(a) For the Lord’s sake (2:13) – not because society demands it or because you accept oppressive practices, but to please God and as a good witness.

(b) Live as free people (2:16), as God’s slaves. Outwardly you still belong to a human slave-master, but inside you belong to God. No master would want to know this!

(c) Honour the emperor (2:17). The emperor demanded worship but Christians are to offer only honour – and he is at the end of the list, no more to be honoured than any others!

(d) Christian wives are to try to win their husbands to Christ (3:1) – very subversive in a society where women were expected to follow their husbands’ religion.

(e) Christian husbands are to go much further and treat their wives with consideration and respect as joint heirs of the gospel and eternal life (3:7).

11. Peter has to be careful in what he writes in case his letter is intercepted and could make trouble for his readers. On the surface, he seems to be supporting imperialism, slavery and patriarchy, and encouraging compliance and submission. But minority communities learn to read between the lines.

12. The early Christians were in no position to challenge structures and practices like these, but they could quietly and peacefully subvert them. In time – and it sadly took a very long time – imperialism, slavery and patriarchy would be exposed as contrary to the gospel and the values of God’s kingdom. Even more sadly, some Christian leaders continued to defend these practices – using passages like this one to do so.

13. We need to be careful how we read and interpret the Scriptures. And we dare not conclude the battle is entirely won. Autocratic governments rule many nations today; there are modern forms of slavery; and patriarchy continues to plague both church and society. We can do more to challenge these practices than Peter’s readers could.

14. What could they do? In this passage, Peter urges five things – which may be just as relevant to us in our very different circumstances:

- (a) Resist the temptation to behave badly, respond violently to provocation and bring discredit to the gospel (2:11).
- (b) Live in ways that were attractive, patient, respectful and a good testimony to their pagan neighbours and families (2:12, 15, 3:1).
- (c) Seek above all to please and honour God, rather than the government, their slave-masters or husbands, trusting in his vindication and justice (2:15, 20).
- (d) Take refuge in their relationship with Jesus, who is not only their example but also their shepherd and overseer or guardian (2:25).
- (e) Keep in mind their calling to be witnesses to the gospel. This may be primarily through their behaviour and ‘without words’ (3:1), although later in the letter Peter will instruct them about how to speak when they have an opportunity.

15. You might want to reflect on what you’ve read already or pick up other things from this passage but here are three questions to ponder:

- (a) What features of British society are contrary to the gospel and the values of God’s kingdom?
- (b) What experiences have we had of unjust treatment – and how did we respond?
- (c) How can we question traditional interpretations and learn to spot the subversive messages in the Bible?