

## Faith in the midst of Cultural Change

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(PIC) This is a picture of Aaron and Melissa Klein. Aaron and Melissa used to own a bakery called *Sweet Cakes* in the state of Oregon. When Aaron and Melissa declined to bake a wedding cake for a same-sex couple, the State of Oregon intervened. The Kleins always served people regardless of the race, gender or sexual orientation before, but they felt it violated their conscience to participate in this kind of wedding. According to the District Attorney, they broke the law. The Kleins were fined \$135,000 by the State because they said they had discriminatory practices. Life has changed in radical ways for the Kleins since that ruling. Aaron now works for the sanitation department; they no longer can afford to keep *Sweet Cakes* open. Some groups laud them as heroes of faith and conscience; other groups vilify them as bigots and hate mongers.

Today's sermon is not about same-sex marriage and I'm not here to defend or rebuke the Kleins. We've had sermons about homosexuality and SSM in the last few years (we'll have more in the future) so we're not really going to get into that. But let me at least say this now though since I brought up the issue of sexuality and it's such an important topic. The Creator God who made heaven and earth, who reigns as the One and Only true King over all of creation has absolute right and claim on every aspect of human life including sexuality. Abraham Kuyper, a Christian writer in the early 20th century said famously, "There is not a square inch in the whole domain of our human existence over which Christ, who is Sovereign over all, does not cry, 'Mine!'"

There's not one single aspect of our lives that God forfeits to us and lets us decide what we think is good for us to do. He is Lord over all. Thankfully, God created and instituted sexuality for the flourishing of humanity (yes, you heard me right: sex is a really, really good thing because God invented it); but he still governs it, he oversees it; to flourish we must obey God's commands about sexuality. I know it's popular in our culture to think and say, "It's my body, it's my bedroom... I can do what I want." That's a life that rejects God; living that kind of life is the embodiment of Ps. 14:1, which says, "The fool says in his heart, 'There is no God.'" There is a God and he's the God of our bodies and he's the God of our bedrooms. And God has good purposes for our bodies, bedrooms and partners, but those good, helpful, glorifying purposes are only experienced when we do life God's way. Because sex is so good, so precious, so wonderful, God saves it for a man and a woman who are joined in marriage. (If you have more questions about the topic of homosexuality and SSM, I'd be happy to talk more with you).

Today's message has a different focus. How do we live authentic Christian lives in a culture that is radically changing? Have you noticed these changes? Are you feeling the the cultural shifts? Standards of morality are changing, views and concepts of truth are changing, regard and respect for religious belief are changing. And these changes are being reflected

everywhere. Politics, education and ethics; every aspect of American life is being influenced by a rise in secular beliefs. And as secular beliefs and values increase, religious life and beliefs are rejected.

I would argue that for many, many years, our American culture accepted and tolerated the values and presumptions of religious life and Christian life in particular. People generally knew the Bible; there was an appreciation and respect for the place of religion in the public world. Even though many Americans may not have even been Christian, there was an ethos, a culture, a respect for the principles and values of religious life. Because of this, Christians, I believe, were duped; really -- we were fooled. Here's how. We began to think Christ's way, Christ's words, Christ's values are normal to our culture; that there's not a lot different between the American way and Christ's way. But that is completely false. The way of Jesus Christ subverts and opposes every man-made system and our influence and impact in the America has suffered because we didn't keep the radical distinction between the Gospel and the American dream.

When you study not just ancient history, but even modern history, what you discover is that Christ's ways have largely been ridiculed, rejected and refused by an unbelieving culture and world. Maybe that's been in very hostile, violent ways in places like the Middle East or quiet ways like in American culture the last 100 years. Listen to the way of Christ.

- "It's better to give than to receive."
- "Turn the other cheek."
- "Anyone who loves father, mother, wife, children more than me is not worthy of me."
- "Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds."

These statements by Jesus are radical. They are so radical that even many in the church do not know how to read and understand such statements; we don't know what to do with them. We're not used to having to believe them since our American culture has largely tolerated us; that's not happening anymore, is it?

So, how do we live at the margins of society? Our secular, pluralistic society is getting more emphatic in its rejection of the way and values of Christ. Before our culture merely ignored Christ; now, many are happy to mock Christ. The ethics of Christ are not being welcomed in the public square. What should we do about that? How should we respond? Sadly, many have done one of two things. First, some have fled. Out of fear many have heard the message, "Christian, you know longer belong; keep your faith to yourself" and that's what they've done. Others, have stayed to fight, but rather than clothing themselves with the character of Christ, they've matched insult for insult, ridicule for ridicule. Rather than being kind, some Christians have resorted to name calling. My dear brothers and sister, we do not model Christ well when we participate in a name-calling battle.

So, what should we do? How should we respond? That's what I want to help you with today. So, if you're interested in this discussion turn to 1 Peter 2:11-17 (READ).

When Peter wrote this letter to the Christian churches located in what's now modern-day Turkey suffering and persecution were their daily experience. Throughout 1 Peter you can see the author trying to help these Christians understand the challenges of suffering and hostility. That's one of the things I love about the scriptures: God helps us in times like this; God has specific words to guide us in hostile times. Let's examine a few things Peter says.

First, notice how he describes these Christians in vs. 11. He says, "You're sojourners and exiles." What does he mean by that? These are OT words; both of these words were used in the OT to describe certain experiences that God's people went through. Sojourners was God's favorite word to describe the patriarchs of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. If you remember, God promised Abraham and his descendants some land to call home. But he didn't give it to them right away; in fact, it took 400 years. So, for centuries God called them "sojourners." "You are wanderers, travelers... people without a home." So they would move from place to place trespassing, if you will, on other people's land, putting up their tents and then taking them down.

The word exile is significant after the fall of Judah in 586BC. Because the nation of Judah and it's leaders descended into sinful immorality and idolatry, God's punishment on the people was that they would be sent into a foreign land as prisoners and slaves. The comforts and conveniences of home vanished. They no longer had the freedom of living in God's land for them, they now lived as exiles in a land far away from home.

And that's what Peter is calling these Christians. You're sojourners; you're exiles. What's he getting at? He's saying, "This place, this world, this era and kingdom isn't yours. You don't belong here; these aren't your values, your treasures or your life. This world isn't your home. You belong to another place, You have a different home. Your citizenship isn't on earth, it is in heaven."

You act differently when you think you're home, right? You relax more. You kick off your shoes. And you get to set the agenda; things happen at your prerogative. Other people don't get to come in and change your rules. They don't get to set the agenda. They don't get to alter the menu or rearrange the furniture, right? If they did, you'd be like, "It's time to leave now!" That's how a lot of Christians are feeling now. A lot of Christians are thinking, "Wait a minute! Why are the rules changing? Why are we redecorating? I didn't approve rearranging the cultural furniture!" like this is our home.

Friends, this is not our home. We are exiles; we are sojourners. Our home is in a far country and we are aliens here. We have a better possession than this world and an abiding one. Let me tell you what that means: it means we shouldn't be surprised to see the rules and values changing in a way that we don't necessarily like. It means we shouldn't be shocked to see an unbelieving world not just dislike, but even mock, the way of Christ. I think this is one

of the reasons why Peter says later in chapter 4 (vs. 12), “Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you.” Why are you surprised? This is not your home.

Notice how Peter doesn’t even think the cultural differences are the main problem (READ vs. 11). The war going on is not with an unbelieving culture that doesn’t accommodate all your desires; the war is inside of you. Your own fleshly, sinful passions in the midst of this foreign land are your enemies, not the land or the people of your sojourning. Very interesting, isn’t it? Culture wars take on a different meaning when you bring in 1 Peter 2. Rather than being at war with the prevailing moods and opinions of an unbelieving culture, you and I are really at war with our sinful tendencies.

Being strangers in this land should make us two things: First, it should make us eager for home. Doesn’t it? Doesn’t eternity with God, reunion with all those we love in Christ, the perfect reign and rule of God in heaven sound glorious? Don’t you long for that day, for that far country, even more knowing that you’re not home; living in a place that has its furniture all in the wrong places? When you think you’re home, you’re not all that eager for heaven. How many of you are eager for Jesus to come back? I remember being afraid of Jesus coming back! “Jesus, just let me graduate HS first!” Why? Because I lived like I was already home. You’re not home.

Secondly, knowing that I’m a stranger and an exile here makes me want to be a good visitor. That’s one of the things Korby and I really care a lot about with our boys. When our boys are at a friends house we want them to be kind, gracious, respectful guests. We don’t want them to take the liberties they do at home.

Friends, God wants us to be good guests, too, while we live on this earth. How does he want us to do that? Look at vs. 12 (READ). Rather than giving into your fleshly desires and taking license with everything like you’re lounging around at home, keep your conduct honorable, Peter says. Honorable is set in contrast to giving into the passions of your flesh. So, be sure your day to day behaviors and practices are upright, moral, exemplary to Christ. Do it in the midst of the Gentiles, meaning, “do it in the midst of people who do not believe in the Lord Jesus Christ like you.” Don’t go into isolation; don’t run and flee from everyone. That’s tricky, isn’t it? How do you remain in the world but not be of the world? How do you remain and make a positive impact in the midst of a world hostile to God without adopting and taking on it’s values? Let’s get even more practical: how do we protect our children’s thought-life; how do we provide some level of shelter and protection from the tools of the Evil One while remaining in the neighborhoods God calls us into as missionary families? That’s not always easy to know. But I would say this: the answer is probably “more of Christ” not, “run for the hills!” Think of it: what if our strategy of raising godly children was more of Christ, more of his word, more of his people, more of his wisdom and way rather “Abandon ship!” We’re not good with “More of Christ!” We’re good with “More basketball and soccer; more dance. More music and more clubs. More fishing trips” And friends, I’m preaching to myself

more than I am to you; Korby and I are doing soul-searching over such things. But dare I say the message we get from our community leaders, school leaders (whom I love and I'm so thankful for) of "You can't be too busy with school activities" isn't true; if you want more of Christ then you have to make choices.

I do believe God's word is telling us that we make an impact in a world that's hostile to Christianity by our honorable conduct. When we live lives of integrity, honesty, kindness and holiness, God accomplishes his purposes through us. Now, don't hear me say that and think, "Ok, everybody will love us again if we're really, really nice." No, that's not what this passage is saying. It says God accomplishes his glorious end game through our honorable conduct. I'm not going to get into the particulars of that end game, but knowing our God we can be sure of many things, mostly that God will do what is right and good to all.

And you can see that the end really is the end. Look at that last phrase in vs. 12; "on the day of visitation" God will be glorified by those who see our good deeds. That's a reference to the return of Christ where he judges the living and the dead. Do you know what that means? It means that the vindication that Peter speaks of won't ultimately happen on this earth. It will happen at the judgment seat of Christ. And on that day, somehow and in someway, our commitment to do life God's way will make a glorifying difference for those who see our good deeds in the face of hostility.

We are just scratching the surface, aren't we? I'm guessing you have a million questions zipping through your mind. This is an important topic. But let's at least start here: Remember, this is not your home. Don't live like it is. Instead, commit yourself to honorable conduct so that others see your good deeds and glorify your God on the day of visitation.

There's so much we didn't talk about today. But two weeks from today Pastor Tim is going to pick up where I've left off and speak more about how we can live honoring lives to God in a culture that is growing more and more hostile to Christ's way.

#### Questions for the week

- Are there any particular cultural issues you are concerned with related to your faith? How come?
- What scriptural truth or revelation today struck you as most important for your faith in our changing world?
- What do you sense God calling you to think or differently as a result of the message today?