



1 Peter 2:11-12
The Great Change

11 Beloved, I beg you as sojourners and pilgrims, abstain from fleshly lusts which war against the soul,
 12 having your conduct honorable among the Gentiles, that when they speak against you as evildoers, they may, by your good works which they observe, glorify God in the day of visitation.

Most of you are probably familiar with the story of the Prophet Balaam from Numbers 22-24. How he was hired by Balak King of Moab to curse the children of Israel as they were going into the promised land. Everyone for instance, remembers how his donkey spoke, and most people also remember how the Lord forbade Balaam to do what Balak wished and curse the people of Israel. Instead no matter what he did or where he stood, he ended up blessing them instead. But what we tend to forget is that Balaam didn't give up on finding a way to earn his payoff from the king. Eventually he took Balaak aside and send something along these lines. ***“Look Balak, the Lord isn't going to let you curse these people because he loves them and He is determined to bless them. Also, as long as He is with them, you won't be able to win against them in battle either. You heard what happened to both the Egyptians and the Amalekites when they tried that. No to defeat the Lord's chosen people, you are going to first have to drive a wedge between them and their God. They are like his bride and He is like their husband, so what you need to do is get them to commit spiritual adultery. And here is how you do it, appeal to their carnal nature.***

Meet them at Baal Peor, but don't send out the men to fight them, don't mobilize the army of Moab. Send out your most attractive young women, send out your priests, proclaim a feast days to Baal, and celebrate them in the lascivious way you can. Let there be intriguing and splendid ceremonies, let there be much wine, women, and song. You watch, in no time you'll have them committing all those abominations the Lord said he would curse them for.”

Balak took those keys Balaam had given him, idolatry and fleshly lust, and he used them and it very nearly caused Israel to be destroyed before they ever crossed the Jordan into the promised land.

But the Devil is wicked, he isn't stupid, he knows that the carnal weapons that worked against the people of God in the wilderness will still work against them wherever they are. In fact in Rev. 2:14 Jesus says to the church in Pergamos: ***“But I have a few things against you, because you have there those who hold the doctrine of Balaam, who taught Balak to put a stumbling block before the children of Israel, to eat things sacrificed to idols, and to commit sexual immorality.”*** And he tells them to repent. There are apostles still alive and already the sins of idolatry and immorality have become a problem in the church and they still are.

Because it is so easy for Christians to fall prey to them, all you have to do is forget who you are, to forget *whose* you are, forget that you are the chosen of God, his beloved people, and to simply begin to take in that which is around you on all sides. Israel was constantly in danger of simply absorbing the

culture, morals and worship of the Gentiles who surrounded them. In fact during their cycles of apostasy, that was precisely what happened.

Christians, you too are constantly in danger of adopting the customs and morals and idols of the surrounding culture. We live in a culture that feeds fleshly lusts, it's the basis of much of our commerce, we have entire cities like Vegas *built* on the gratification of fleshly lusts. *Not* giving demands constant vigilance even from Christians. That is why Peter who knew the temptations of the world all too well, doesn't *suggest* these Christians whom he loves *abstain from fleshly lusts*, he **begs** them.

That then is my first application, as your Pastor I too would beg you; heed the calls to holiness you've been hearing in this book and abstain from fleshly lusts. All of you who are really Christians, man, women, and child, are engaged in a war, I'm not talking about "the War on Terror" – or as it should be called, "**the defense against Worldwide Jihad**," I'm talking about the spiritual conflict that Paul speaks of in Eph. 6:11-12 "***Put on the whole armor of God, that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil. For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this age, against spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places.***"

This is a war in which some of your most deadly enemies aren't out there, they are in here [heart]. During the Spanish Civil War as the Spanish Dictator Franco approached Madrid, he boasted he had four columns outside the city and a secret *fifth column* which would wage war against the city from within. From that boast we get our term fifth columnist to describe the hidden enemy within.

Well the redeemed, brothers and sisters, have a fifth column waging war from within themselves. The Westminster Confession 13.2 describes it this way when it speaks of sanctification saying: "***This sanctification is throughout, in the whole man; yet imperfect in this life, there abiding still some remnants of corruption in every part; whence arises a continual and irreconcilable war, the flesh lusting against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh***" It is that inner spiritual conflict that Paul describes in anguished words in Romans 7.

It is a terrible warfare, a *war against the soul*, and one that many of you know can leave terrible wounds that continue to smart years after they were inflicted. But even in the fact of that conflict, there is consolation, the very existence of the struggle within you is proof of the New Birth. It is proof that you are Christians. Unbelievers aren't at war against the lusts of the flesh because they are still on the same side serving the same master. That is why as the biblical gospel retreats in any given nation, the prevalence of sin steadily increases. Moralism is useless in this fight. All that does is make men circumspect about their sins, and encourages hypocrisy.

So what should you do? Peter says, you must remember we are God's people and pilgrims in this fallen world, and rather than taking the road that seems easy of capitulating, you must abstain. But as much you might think that the solution is to flee from the world entirely and live like the Amish or the Christian Hermits who used to dwell alone in caves in the desert, or on top of pillars. You are to remain *among the Gentiles*, the unbelievers, and live excellent lives of holiness right in their midst.

Let your conduct be honorable, above reproach. This is something that modern Christians are not doing the greatest job at. Instead we take grace and make it into a license to sin, when in fact grace should lead inexorably to holiness. The idea that God's grace opens the floodgates of sin is abhorrent,

Paul wrote with revulsion in Romans 6:1-2 ***“What shall we say then? Shall we continue in sin that grace may abound? Certainly not! How shall we who died to sin live any longer in it?”***

It is inevitable that unbelievers will revile believers and say all manner of horrid things about them, Peter knew there was no way to stop the persecution of Christians in the world, He himself had heard Jesus say: ***“If you were of the world, the world would love its own. Yet because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you.”*** And ***“Blessed are you when they revile and persecute you, and say all kinds of evil against you falsely for My sake.”***, but if all they can generate are lies, then the hollowness of those rebukes will be evident both to them and to you and their power to wound and ridicule will be greatly diminished. Franklin, unbeliever that he was, was right when he said that ***“the sting of any rebuke is the truth.”***

The early Christians were often spoken of as evildoers by the pagan Romans. The Roman Historian Tacitus in his *Annals* makes it clear that he despised the Christians, saying they were hated because of their vices. It was widely rumored that they were cannibals who ate flesh and drank blood at their gatherings, that they were incestuous because a Christians readily acknowledged that they were all brothers and sisters, that they were atheists for they did not believe in the Roman gods.

But as the Romans actually encountered the Christians and saw their conduct, again and again they were either forced to admit the excellence of their lives, or were won over by it. Libanius – a Pagan philosopher wrote after observing the difference between Christian marriages and pagan one wrote: ***“O, what excellent women have these Christians.”*** The Christian Apologists who defended the faith in their writings were able to appeal to their exemplary conduct following conversion to Christianity as an indisputable evidence of the faith. Justin Martyr for instance wrote in his *First Apology*:

[folder]“Those who once rejoiced in fornication now delight in continence alone; those who made use of magic arts have dedicated themselves to the good and unbegotten God; we who once took most pleasure in the means of increasing our wealth and property now bring what we have into a common fund and share with everyone in need; we who hated and killed one another and would not associate with men of different tribes because of [their different] customs, now after the manifestation of Christ live together and pray for our enemies and try to persuade those who unjustly hate us, so that they, living according to the fair commands of Christ, may share with us the good hope of receiving the same things [that we will] from God, the master of all.”

This good conduct ***adorned*** their preaching of the gospel and often won over their neighbors to Christ, Justin wrote that many were ***“turned from a life of violence and tyranny, because they were conquered either by the constancy of their neighbors' lives, or by the strange patience they noticed in their injured associates, or by experiencing their honesty in business matters.”*** Those who were turned and converted were those whom Peter said would glorify God in the time of visitation, that is when Jesus returns once again.

I cannot help but wonder if part of the reason we make so little impact on the unbelievers, is that today we think that success will consist of acting just like them.

Which leads me to my second application: If you are a Christian, you have not been called to be conformed to the image of the world and to march to the drum beat set by the world, the flesh, and the devil. You are called to emulate Christ and follow Him. I will freely admit to you, that as one of your shepherds I have often failed to call you to that. I confessed to a fellow Pastor just this past week: ***“Far***

too seldom have I looked any of them in the eye and said, it is high time you became serious about following the Lord.” Well, now I’m looking at you, I won’t address you by name, there is no need, you know if you are following the Lord or following the culture, *it’s time we were all about the business of taking up the cross, and abstaining from things that can only wound us anyway. Time to keep the Sabbath holy, time to speak differently, time to stop lying, time to stop lusting and coveting, time to stop grumbling, or holding grudges.*

Which brings me to my final application: Maybe you’re thinking OK I can do that Andy, and I’m going to start first thing Monday. Well hold on there pilgrim, don’t go off half cocked. **No YOU can’t**, not in the flesh, no more than a worldling can keep a “new years resolution” to stop doing something they love. Your enemy is roaring lion, and he prowls about day after day seeking whom he can devour. Kids, do you think that an unarmed man or women can fight a lion and win? No. And this isn’t a battle we can win in the flesh. It is only if we believe in Christ, and have His Spirit, and have put on the whole armor of God that we will have any chance of standing against the wiles of the devil. Bunyan’s Christian couldn’t stand against Apollyon without first being regenerated, having come to faith in Jesus Christ having his desires changed, entering into the church, and then being armed with the belt of truth, breastplate of righteousness, Shield of Faith, the Sword of Spirit, and the Helmet of salvation, you won’t either. You wouldn’t go charging into physical battle untrained and unequipped, don’t go into spiritual battle either.

And if you haven’t enlisted in the army of the Lord, if you haven’t taken the initial step of faith in Christ, that’s where you need to start. Until you do, you won’t change evil habits, ***Jer. 13:23 Can the Ethiopian change his skin or the leopard its spots? Then may you also do good who are accustomed to do evil.*** So start with a new heart, and don’t wait till Monday, now is the day of decision.