Congregation of the Lord Jesus Christ.

In the first year at University, students take 100 level courses – philosophy 101 and math 102, etc; sort of introductory courses. And in the second year they take 200 level courses – more detailed and more specific courses.

Well, we could call chapter 1 of Peter’s letter his ‘100 level course in Christianity.’ He kind of summarized the essentials salvation and Christian living. And chapter 2 began Peter’s ‘200 level courses.’ It started with **Christian living 201**. Peter identified two vital aspects for growth in the church – putting off love-spoiling attitudes and behaviours, and being hungry for preaching and Bible study. Verses 4-10 are **Church History 201**. Last week, we learned wonderful truthes about the New Testament church, but to do so we had to do some careful Old Testament research.

Well, our text begins Peter’s **Christian living 202**. From here right through to the end of the letter Peter provides detailed teaching about different areas of Christian living – personal holiness, being a good witness, life in society, marriage, and life in the church. And as this detailed teaching about Christian living begins, **Peter Prioritizes Personal Piety**. And piety simply means holy living. And Peter prioritizes personal piety in verse 11 by telling us **what to avoid** and in verse 12 by telling us **what to embrace**. So, they will be the two parts of the sermon.

And we are going to see that these words are very relevant and much needed today. Regarding what we must **embrace**, the Conversion Therapy bill that the government is looking to bring in will bring challenges to those committed to live according to the Bible, as I shall explain. And other examples of this will surely increase in the coming years. But regarding what we must **avoid**, every single one of us needs to understand what is at stake with the war that is described in verse 11. If we do not take these words seriously, we and others will suffer all sorts of pain and sorrow, and some may even be drawn away from Christianity. So, let us pay careful attention to the instruction in these verses.

1. We begin then with **verse 11** and **What to Avoid**. And we will divide this point up into the two parts of the verse – **The Duty Required** and **The Reason Given**.
   1. So, first of all, **The Duty Required**: “*Beloved, I urge you as sojourners and exiles to abstain from the passions of the flesh*.”
      1. Now, before we get into what abstaining from the passions of the flesh looks like, how Peter describes members of the church is worth noting: He calls them “*beloved*” and “*sojourners and exiles*.”
         1. ‘**Beloved’** is one of those of old fashioned terms of affection that we don’t really use much anymore. But “*beloved*” reveals that those Peter wrote to (and all believers!) were deeply loved by Peter.
            1. And this is significant: If we are told to do something, because the person telling us is in charge and we must do what they say, that’s not a strong motivation for obedience, is it! It often produces begrudging obedience, at best. But if we are told to do something by someone who really loves us, we are much more motivated to listen to them and to obey them.
            2. Well, in the verses, previous, Peter has just explained how God has made believers His people, by showing them His mercy in Christ. And this was why Peter loved those he was writing to; they were his brothers and sisters in Christ, as are all who read these words and believe in Jesus. So, what follows is an appeal motivated by love!
         2. But Peter also says, “*I urge you,* ***as sojourners and exiles***…” And we have noted the importance of these words, many times, already. The people Peter originally wrote to were, literally, exiles. But every believer is a spiritual exile or pilgrim, if you like. We are journeying to our true home in heaven. And because of sin and what we believe, we will find life on earth uncomfortable and difficult, in many ways, and we will be persecuted. And there is so much around us that is incompatible with who we are and where we are headed. So, we have this reason also to do what the Holy Spirit, through Peter, requires here.
      2. And what is required of us, as the beloved of God, and sojourners and exiles in this sin-infested world, is that we “*abstain from the passions of the flesh*.”
         1. The Greek word translated as “***abstain****,*” literally means ‘to keep your distance’ or ‘be far away from.’
            1. If you remember the story of the prodigal son, you will remember that the son eventually decided to go back home and offer to become a servant. And we are told that he was walking home, “*but while he was still a long way off…*” And it is the same word used there. So, we must “*[stay a long way away from] the passions of the flesh*.” We are not to go anywhere near these things.
            2. One dictionary said that “to abstain” means “to refrain deliberately and often with an effort of self-denial from an action or practice.” So, this is an active and conscious decision of the will. It means to consider something – a certain thing or a certain activity – and say No! I must not. I will not.
         2. And what are these “***passions of the flesh***” that we must with great effort keep far away from? Well, using the principle of letting Scripture interpret Scripture, flip over to the beginning of **chapter 4**. There Peter uses the same terms and gives some examples. We read there: “*Since therefore Christ suffered in the flesh, arm yourselves with the same way of thinking, for whoever has suffered in the flesh has ceased from sin, so as to live for the rest of the time in the flesh no longer for human passions but for the will of God. The time that is past suffices for doing what the Gentiles want to do, living in sensuality, passions, drunkenness, orgies, drinking parties, and lawless idolatry*.” So, the passions of the flesh are things like “*living in sensuality, passions, drunkenness, orgies, drinking parties, and lawless idolatry*.” And living in sensuality basically means engaging in any type of forbidden sexual activity.
         3. You know, a common complaint that the world has of Christianity is that it is **anti-fun**. Have you heard that idea before? They listen to our sermons and podcasts, and they read our magazines and articles, and they accuse us of being obsessed with sex and alcohol and drugs– this is bad, and that is wrong, and we are against this, and that should be banned, etc. So, we are anti-fun. Well, I am pretty sure that every single adult here will have a sad story, to one degree or another, about the effects of sexual sin or alcohol or drugs. And there will be some of us who have continued struggles in these areas, or continued regret and hurt. And as much as the world likes to say that sleeping around or drunkenness is fine and nothing to get hung up about, have you noticed those stories in the news about, you know, ‘Gordon and Beryl,’ who married as childhood sweethearts and died days after their 72nd wedding anniversary. Why do you think stories like that make the news? It is because, deep down, everyone knows, in their hearts, that that is how it is supposed to be!
         4. Now, the reality is that that is not how it is for everyone, including believers. And even ‘Gordon and Beryl marriages’ will not be perfect. So, the good news of the gospel is that there is forgiveness and healing in Christ for those confess their sins and repent.
         5. But, because we are God’s “*chosen race*,” and a “*royal priesthood*,” and a “*people for His own possession*,” and His “*beloved*,” we must keep far away from sexual sin, drunkenness and lawless idolatry.
   2. And notice also **The Reason Given** for this command: “*Which wage war against your soul*.”
      1. Have you heard of the **Geneva convention**? It is the set of rules for war that politicians and diplomats came up with many decades ago. Well, **terrorists** do not care about the Geneva convention. They will do anything and everything to kill and create havoc and uncertainty. So, I want to encourage you to think of the devil’s soldiers as terrorists.
         1. And you need to understand that there is a war with these invisible terrorists going on inside each one of us. You see, until we get to heaven, we will not be free of sin. So, the devil’s terrorists aim their temptations at the sinful desires that remain in our hearts to draw us towards sin and away from God. They study our “weaknesses,” and they work out when is the best time to set off temptation bombs. And if they sense we are strengthened in one area, they will probe us here and there looking for other weaknesses.
         2. And they are **under the command of Satan himself**, who is described in Scripture as “*the Father of lies*.” So, he and his demons will tell you that you can get away with it. No one will ever know! It feels so good! You can always ask for forgiveness later! You can’t really help it! You have this under control; it’s not an addiction. And it’s actually not as bad as your parents or elders make it out to be! And everyone else does it. Do these excuses sound familiar?
      2. And look at what is at stake: They “***wage war against your soul***.” There are several lists in the New Testament that mention sins like drunkenness and sexual immorality and fits of anger and homosexuality and jealousy and greed. And they all end with something like those who unrepentantly continue in these sorts of sins “*will not inherit the kingdom of God*.” And this was said to the church!
         1. Now, we rightly teach the doctrine of the perseverance of the saints – God will bring all His chosen ones to heaven. It is a doctrine of enormous comfort for those who truly wrestle with their sin and guilt. Ultimately, our salvation is secured not by our efforts, but by Christ’s work on the cross! Hallelujah! Yes?!
         2. But brothers and sisters, we may not misuse this doctrine as an excuse to think that we can continually and unrepentantly sin and still be welcomed to heaven.
         3. If the Apostle Paul can praise certain individuals in some of his letters for their gospel work and tell us later on that they had fallen away because they were “*in love with this present world*,” then let none of us think that we are above falling away. We must take warnings like this one, seriously!
      3. So, God’s Word to you today, in relation to things like sexual immorality and drunkenness is keep your distance! Say, No! I shall not! I will not!

Now, I know what some of us will be thinking: Pastor, I hear this and I want to abstain, but I have tried doing it many times in the past, only to find myself, sooner or later, caving in to temptation and sinning. I feel so guilty and so dirty and so tired. What do I do?

* + 1. Well, the first thing to know is that you are not alone. **1 John 1:8** says, “*If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us*.” None of us are free of sin.
    2. And then John continues, “*If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness*.” So, the right response to sin is to confess it, straight away. Take it to the Lord and tell Him that you are sorry for your sins and plead with Him to cleanse you again.
    3. And if this is a certain sin or sins that you keep falling into, then you must ask fellow believers for help. Talk to a mature believer or an elder and ask for an accountability and encouragement relationship; someone who will walk beside you and pray with you and to whom you can be accountable.

1. But another thing to do is the second part of our sermon. You see, a consistent message of the Bible is that a key strategy for ‘putting off’ is to ‘put on.’ So, we work on the things we want to stop doing by applying ourselves to the things that we ought to be doing. So, having heard what we must avoid, verse 12 reveals a keyway we do that by telling us **What to Embrace**. And once again, we will divide this point up into the two parts of the verse – **the duty required** and **the reason given**.
   1. And we begin with **The Duty Required**: “*Keep your conduct among the Gentiles honourable*.”
      1. And again, before we explore what keeping your conduct honourable looks like, the phrase “*among the Gentiles*” is instructive.
         1. Peter’s original readers were probably mostly of Jewish ethnicity, who now lived in a non-Jewish or Gentile country. But it is not so much ethnicity that is in view here. Other English Bible versions have “pagans,” which basically means unbelievers.
         2. And Peter’s point here is that being surrounded by unbelievers, the temptation to compromise and to behave as everyone else behaved would have been immense. And we all know the power of peer pressure, don’t we. If you are sitting in a group of people, just start looking up at the sky. I can guarantee that in a few seconds, everyone in the group will be looking up at the sky? And we wear what everyone else wears and how they wear it, and we talk like everyone else and the pressure to misbehave in one way or another when everyone else is doing it can be huge. I can’t see your hands, but I am fairly confident that if I asked you all to put up your hand if you have never given in to peer pressure, not a hand would be raised.
         3. But the phrase “*among the Gentiles*” is noteworthy for another reason, which is the temptation to withdraw from society and set up a Christian community, which has been tried many times throughout church history. And I will freely admit that there are times when I really like the sound of that!
         4. But we have no mandate in Scripture to do that. Instead, Jesus called us to be “*the salt of the earth*” and to “*let [our] light shine before others, so that they may see [our] good works and give glory to [our] Father who is in heaven*.” And Peter says here, “*Keep your conduct among the Gentiles honourable*…” So, to put it another way, we are “to be in the world, but not of it.” We are to live in ordinary society but not to imitate their sinful ways of thinking or talking or behaving.

* + 1. Instead, we are to “*keep [our] conduct honourable*.”
       1. When we discussed the word “abstain,” I said it involves deliberate and daily effort. And it is the same with embracing honourable conduct: We consider a certain way of thinking or speaking or behaving, and we say, Yes! I will do this!
       2. But if you read **Galatians 5**, for example, you hear phrases like, “*walk with the Spirit*,” “*be led by the Spirit*,” “*keep in step with the Spirit*, ” and the “*fruit of the Spiri*t.” This is a **spiritual** activity. Only the Holy Spirit can overcome the passions of the flesh. So, you **must begin with prayer**. Pray, “*Spirit of God, help me to keep my conduct honourable*.”
       3. And how does he do this? In and through **the Bible**. He uses the preaching and teaching and reading of the Word to produce honourable conduct.
          1. And so, in relation to sexual activity or alcohol or drugs or idolatry or anger or greed or gossip, you must get your Bible out and study what the Bible says about these things. And I am serious. You cannot read this passage and just hope that the Spirit will magically change you. You must study these matters in the Bible and ask the Spirit to help you value what the Lord values, and to not do what the Lord forbids, and instead to do what the Lord commands.
          2. So, as we see more about what honourable conduct in various areas of life look like in the rest of Peter’s ‘Christian living 202 course, ’ ask the Spirit of the Lord to bring your life into line with God’s will in each of these areas.
  1. Well, finally then, that brings us to **The Reason Given** for why we must “*keep [our] conduct honourable among the Gentiles*.” And it is *“so that when they speak against you as evildoers, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day of visitation*.”
     1. A moment ago, I quoted Jesus’ words from **Matthew 5**, where He says, “*Let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to our Father who is in heaven*.” And what is in view there is that God can use our good works to create opportunities for us to share the gospel with unbelievers, which the Holy Spirit can use to convert them. So, good works can lead to conversion.
     2. But that is ***not*** what is in view here. What is in view here is that unbelievers hate the good deeds that believers do: *“When they speak against you as evildoers*.” Look ahead to chapter 3:16. There we are told that we must always explain what we do to unbelievers with “*gentleness and respect, having a good conscience, so that, when you are slandered, those who revile your good behaviour in Christ may be put to shame*.” And look also at chapter 4:4: “*With respect to this they are surprised when you do not join them in the same flood of debauchery, and they malign you;* *but they will give account to Him who is ready to judge the living and the dead.”*
     3. And brothers and sisters, these are **timely words**. Right now, our government is considering legislation, which will make it illegal for parents to tell their child not to change their gender, or to try and prevent them from beginning hormone therapy or getting surgery for gender transition. So, as a parent, you can tell your child that you don’t want them to get a tattoo and you can forbid it, but if you say or do this in relation to changing gender, you will be fined or imprisoned. And the same legislation will, supposedly, allow churches to teach that the Bible forbids homosexuality, but if we counsel a person away from homosexuality or pursue church discipline for this sin, we will be liable to fines or imprisonment. So, the “*good deeds*” or “*good behaviour*” of Christian parents and churches, who are just trying to be faithful to God’s Word, is seen as evil by a great many people today. And we will be slandered and reviled and maligned and fined and imprisoned. It is not ‘if,’ anymore, it is just a matter of ‘when.’
     4. And the encouragement that our God offers us is ***eternal*** **encouragement**. He says, Though they speak evil of you now, they will “*glorify God on the day of visitation*.” And this is a reference to Judgment Day. Again, **chapter 4:4**, “*they malign you [now]; but they will give account to Him who is ready to judge the living and the dead.”* On Judgment Day, those who called the believers that Peter originally wrote to ‘evildoers,’ will publicly acknowledge that what those believers did was right and that God is fully justified in condemning them to everlasting hell for their unbelief and wickedness. And those who fine and imprison Christian parents and ministers and elders today, will, at the day of Judgment, publicly acknowledge that what we did was right and that God is fully justified in condemning them to everlasting hell for their unbelief and wickedness.

We are the beloved of God. We are a people for His own possession. We will, one day, enjoy His permanent presence in the joys and glories of the new heavens and the new earth! But for now, we must abstain from fleshly passions, because they wage war against our soul. And one of the ways that we do that is by at the same time embracing or pursuing honourable conduct. It will not make you popular and it will not be easy and it will be costly. So, look to the Spirit of God in prayer, confess your sins, each day, rejoice in the finished work of Christ, and may God help us all. Amen.