

Part 6: Gospel Culture in Public and Private

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If you haven't already done so, please open up your Bibles to 1 Peter 2.

Today, Peter is going to talk about the intersection between Christianity and the culture of your heart, and the culture of our world. Throughout the history of the church, Christians have needed to figure out what it looks like to live as Christians both privately and publicly.

There have been books, lectures, and communities that have formed because of the relationship people think the church and her gospel should have with culture. Broadly speaking there are two camps in the debate. There is the camp that thinks culture and Christianity can be friends, and there is a camp which thinks they are fundamental foes.

While this might sound like a boring debate for scholars the truth is you live each day trying to reconcile your own views of Jesus with the culture which is around you. If you're not a believer, I'm sure you've wrestled yourself in different ways with your own relationship to culture or your relationship to Christian culture.

If I were to generalize, and if we were to look at Christian history, there seems to be four default mindsets believers can fall into regarding their faith and I wonder if you might be able to find some of your own leanings in one of these.

There is first, Casper Christianity. For the Casper Christians, it's friendly ghost Christianity. There isn't much disagreement between secular culture and Christianity because they are irrelevant to each other. Faith becomes immaterial and unseen. Faith is meant to be private and personal. In one sense this is the don't-ask-don't-tell relationship between Christianity and culture.

Then there is Chameleon Christianity. For Chameleon Christians they seek to align themselves with culture not by hiding their Christianity, but by openly adapting their Christianity to the backdrop of the modern world. In today's western world this looks like faith filtered through a pluralistic lens of tolerance. Truth begins to become relative, and the gospel message begins to become softened by losing certain sharp edges like sin and judgment. Instead the message becomes a central message of love and good works, things which the world finds admirable themselves.

Or maybe you find yourself to be a proponent of Crusader Christianity. Crusader Christianity understands the difference between secular and Christian culture, but thinks that if it takes the position of power it can defeat a secular culture and rule over it. For some of us, this looks to take positions of political power. If we can get the right president, the right judges, and the right laws, we can actually defeat secular culture and rule with our own morality. For others, these positions of power are less political and more culture. Maybe we believe that if we can become accepted in sphere of art, entertainment or science we can earn a sort of respectability which will allow us to usher in a utopian sort of experience of Jesus.

Lastly, there is Curmudgeon Christianity. This is the "Get off my lawn" branch of Christianity. Like the crusader, they realize a gap between Christian culture and secular culture, but they lack the optimism and triumphalism of the crusader. Instead these believers, hole up in their Christian ghettos and they wait anxiously for Jesus to get them out of here. If they do have to go out in public, they social distance like the best of them. They show a whole lot of discomfort and distrust of anything which is not by nature, "Christian."

Why do I start with these categories? Because whether you are aware of it or not, your heart and your actions are fueled by the way you understand the shaping force of the gospel. And far from being something of mere moral or ideological importance, your perception of these relationships have the ability to help or harm your own heart and the hearts of others.

In our passage today, Peter assumes a tension between the gospel and culture in two places. An internal tension in the culture of our hearts. And an external tension in the culture of our world. How are we to view this? We are not to view this with an empty triumphalism, for there is a real challenge in both of these. But we are also not to view them with defeatist withdrawal. Instead we see the realistic view of gospel Christianity: a Christianity where the tension of the cross makes sense of the tension of our lives.

This is what we are going to see today in two short verses in 1 Peter. We are going to see first: **The Internal Battle for Your Heart**, second we are going to see **The External Battle for the Hearts of Others**.

Let me read our text for us today: **1 Peter 2:11-12**.

So we are reaching to point of Peter's letter where he is writing to churches and calling them to act differently. We just read a couple ways believers are to act differently, next week we are going to see how Peter wants us to act distinctly in regards to our government and authorities. Then he shows how we are to act differently in regards to our spouses. And after that he is going to address how Christians suffer distinctly.

The gospel really changes all of our life. Does anything that we do earn us salvation? No. But our salvation in Jesus Christ changes everything that we do.

When it comes to acting differently, Peter knows that it's not always easy. I have a friend who just found out she has some pretty severe food allergies. It's good news that those allergies are now known, but the truth is, it's hard to change her diet. It's hard to no longer eat the things she used to like. It's hard to no longer have common food as the center of her social gatherings.

So too when we are changed by Jesus, we receive healing change, but these changes are hard. There will be tension.

But look at how Peter addresses this tension: **1 Peter 2:11a**.

Peter calls the church, Christians, sojourners and exiles. People without a home. People who are learning to adapt and live in a culture which is different than the one they were born into.

This is a return to how Peter opened this letter if you remember: **1 Peter 1:1**.

To be a Christian is to belong by grace through faith to God and not to the world. As a result there is a level of tension. We have been freed from sin, but we still wrestle with sin. We have been promised a bodily resurrection, but we still ache in our bodies. We have been promised salvation not only from the wages of sin, but from all the effects of it and yet we live in a world which presents brokenness before us in every way.

Christianity exists in the already not yet. We have already been saved, but we have not yet finally and fully been saved. We have already received so much, but not yet have we received everything. And in the midst of this tension Peter provides one word which anchors our experience as Christians: beloved.

What is our hope as sojourners and strangers? It is that even though we live in the already but not yet, in this present moment we find ourselves loved by God himself.

We know the way in which being loved changes us. And last week Peter reminded the church that it is not in being loved by the world that you find freedom, but in being loved by God through Jesus. Culture's love for you changes, but God's love for those who put their faith and hope in Jesus is a foundational love.

In 1 Peter 1:18, we read that we have been ransomed from our futile ways of thinking not by gold or silver, but by the precious blood of Jesus Christ.

He says in 1:23 that we have been born again not of perishable seed, but of the living and abiding word of God.

And above all this he reminds us: **1 Peter 1:3b-4.**

In Jesus we are loved by God. What does that mean? It means you have been ransomed from the hands of a dangerous enemy. It means you've been accepted not by your own works, but by the works of Jesus which will always prove true. It means you have the promise of eternal life. It means that laid up for you is an inheritance which nothing in this world can touch.

You see Christianity does include "do" language, but the "do" of Christianity is always rooted in the "done" of Jesus Christ. This life will present hardships as strangers and exiles but the biggest affirmation and comfort we have as believers is that we in those moments, are loved by God on account of Jesus.

In Psalm 77 we read the of the Psalmist who is wrestling with the tension of this "already-not-yet" world. And look at what he rests in: **Psalm 77:4-9.**

He feels the weight of the sojourner, but then he provides this series of rhetorical questions all of which assume a "No!" Has God removed his love from him? No! Has God forgotten him? No! How much more for us as believers who can see the completed work of Jesus do we get to remind ourselves of this wonderful foundation!

The truth is we will not be able to live as Christians if we don't understand the love of God which makes us Christians.

This is so needed because one of the first places we can feel like strangers once we are saved is in our own hearts. This is our first point today: **The Internal Battle for your Heart.**

Look again at **1 Peter 2:11.**

Here Peter addresses the internal culture of your own heart. To have been ransomed by Jesus, reborn by his word, and accepted by his work, is to have new desires rise, and old desires become irrelevant.

The truth is, when we realize that Jesus is all that we need, we realize we don't need what we thought we needed. When we realize that Jesus' work is what justifies us, we don't need to constantly strive for our own glory in our work. When we realize that Jesus fully satisfies us we realize that we don't need to be enslaved to food, wine or entertainment. When we realize that Jesus bring us identity we don't need to find identity in our beauty or sexual exploits. When we realize Jesus brings us purpose we don't need to be enslaved to the never ending quest for adventure.

It's true, we don't need those things anymore. But the problem is just because we don't need them doesn't mean we won't wrestle with our desire for them.

For those of you who have read the Lord of the Rings, or watched the films, we see this battle that Peter is alluding to in the characters of Gollum and Smeagol.

Smeagol was the peaceable and friendly hobbit, and Gollum was the nasty creature Smeagol turned into when the Ring corrupted his heart. But for most of the series, Smeagol doesn't have the ring, Frodo the Ringbearer does. It was Frodo's burden to bear and yet it didn't mean that the voice of Gollum was silent to Smeagol.

Just because Jesus has taken our sin from us, it does not mean that the voice of sin has been forever silenced in our hearts. We must learn to continually abstain from the old ways of Gollum and like Smeagol learn to trust the goodness of his new master.

As effective as Jesus is to bear our sin for us, Peter knows how hard this is and he communicates this when he refers to sin as the passions of the flesh.

We love to think of passion for our spouse. Passion for our favorite sports team. Passion for our children. But don't neglect what the Bible says about your sin. You wrestle with sin because you are passionate for it. All sin is first and foremost a crime of passion.

This brings a needed correction to our understanding of sin because we tend to pacify sin. We sterilize it as simply wrong actions or wrong thoughts, but sin is primarily a wrong affection. A wrong desire.

And I'm sure you've encountered that haven't you? In different areas and in different times we feel the passion rise in us. What happens when you feel that craving? A craving not according to the living and abiding word of God, but according to the flesh, meaning your old identity?

We can respond in two ways, each of which reveal cultures than need corrected by the gospel. First we can respond with a dismissive and overly triumphant demeanor. We can either think that our own actions can deliver us, or we can think that because we have been promised ultimate salvation in Jesus Christ that we don't need to worry about it.

But notice what Peter says, these passions wage war against your soul. Sin is not a matter of morality, it's a matter of mortality. Left unchecked, it can and will kill you. It is a danger to you.

Look at how the apostle James puts it: **James 1:13-15**.

We cannot afford an empty triumphalism against sin. Sin seeks to destroy you, as familiar as it might seem to you, as comfortable as those passions once were, now they wage war against you. And yet, against such a dangerous foe, we are optimistic. We do not respond to the temptations of sin in defeatist withdrawal.

Look with me at: **2 Timothy 1:7**.

Because Jesus has ransomed us, caused us to be born again, and empowered us with his Holy Spirit, we really can effectively wage war against sin. How might you do this in your own heart? First, abstain from sin. Don't date it. Don't negotiate with it. Abstain from it. Run from it. That's Peter's message.

But secondly, invite other believers into it. Few wars are waged by individuals. A godly community encourages us and covers us when we are weak.

A gospel-realist sees the culture of sin in the tension of the cross. Sin is dangerous and it demands our death. But because Jesus died for our sins, we know that we can day by day achieve victory in our own fight against it.

An English architect named Christopher Wren was once asked why he had his laborers polishing the back of the heads of sculptures he installed in a cathedral. They said, "Why all this work for something that no one will ever see?" Wren simply responded, "God will see it."

While it's true that some of what you do in your own heart will never be seen by anyone but God, Peter assumes that much of the culture in your own will actually be seen by those around you. And with that Peter turns to his second point, which is **The External Battle for the Heart of Others**.

Let's read our full text again: **1 Peter 2:11-12**.

So here Peter calls us to be mindful of our internal culture because it has an effect on our own soul, and then he calls us to bear in mind our actions in an external culture because it has an effect on the souls of others.

Peter cannot disassociate Christian conversion from Christian conduct. Conversion to Jesus, new identity in Jesus will, and should, change our actions. Look at the way Peter has shown this already: **1 Peter 1:15, 17, 2:12**.

This is why we need to have a solid understanding of our interaction with culture because conversion carries the culture of the gospel into all the spheres of culture in our lives. We should act different on Facebook. We should act different in the workplace. We should act different at the brewery. Why? We belong to and are beloved by Jesus.

And Peter's specific call is that we should keep our conduct among the Gentiles (nonbelievers) honorable, or another way you could interpret it, beautiful. I think that's a really challenging way to view this, through the lens of observable beauty.

We can often think our conduct to be honorable, but honorable conduct is sometimes able to be justified on an invisible level. We can be honorable in a stoic sense, and be seen as only a wallflower. But here, Christian conduct is beautifully visible. Even if it is treated in a less than beautiful way.

Peter's assumption when it comes to Christianity and culture is that conversion ought to distance you from the passions of culture, but not from the view of culture. Here he is assuming that your conversion will bear fruit which is observable in public, and beautifully so.

To the Casper and Curmudgeon Christians, the gospel must be seen in your interactions with the world. This doesn't just mean doing what is beautiful and honorable, but it also means abstaining from what is gross and dishonorable.

In the business world, do those around you see your Christian conduct and find the gospel to be beautiful? Or do they see in you a distasteful spirit? Do your friends on Facebook see conversations and photos dripping with grace? Or venomous self-obsession?

Do your roommates see your relationship to alcohol, or humor, or movies to be synonymous with the desires of the world? Or do they see a subtle but noticeable distinction in those spheres.

We generally push pack against the old phrase "preach the gospel, use words if necessary," because we know words are needed. But just because words are needed doesn't mean that actions don't carry gospel weight.

While this challenges our sin in public, it also brings a sense of optimism for our beautiful works in public, look at **1 Peter 2:12**.

Now Peter here references a "day of visitation." There are times where this day of visitation is judgement day. And it is true that on judgement day, all who resisted God will see and glorify the God that they themselves rejected even if it ends in their own damnation.

But I don't think this is the way Peter is using the day of visitation here. In the Old Testament we see that visitation by God can often be a day of judgment, but it can also be a day of gracious help.

Also just before this text, Peter made it clear that there is no glory for those who stumble over Jesus. But for those who are built on him, there is glory and honor. In a few weeks we will see how Peter talks about the conduct of wives whose godly actions win their husbands to the gospel.

Given the context of Peter, I think that he here is assuming that this gospel which saves believers, will produce works, which even though they might be resisted by culture, will actually bear fruit which helps lead even their persecutors to salvation.

As we live beautiful lives for the gospel, people might actually see the substance of our faith match the message of our faith, and they might glorify God by themselves becoming believers!

Peter is teaching here something he heard Jesus himself say: **Matthew 5:14-16**.

Our actions in our culture are part of our witness. In fact a fully rounded view of evangelism says that words without works are just as incomplete as works without words.

Why do we need to have a gospel view of our faith and our culture? Not because a war of culture is at stake but because a war of souls is at stake.

And it's in this war of souls that we must understand the tension of the gospel which saved ours.

Is there grounds for great confidence in this text? Yes. Should we believe that Christians should produce visibly beautiful works in all areas of their lives? Yes. Do we trust that God might use some of that beauty to win people to Jesus for the glory of God? Yes.

But in the middle of this optimism there is a piece of humbling realism: "so that when they speak against you as evildoers." You see the gospel keeps Casper and Curmudgeon Christians out of hiding, but it also curbs the desire Chameleon and Crusader Christians to find acceptance in culture.

Are we to be optimistic about culture? Yes. Because the gospel saves people. The public witness of it, the beautiful nature of it won our soul and it will win the souls of others too. But the realistic nature of it is that it will always be resisted at the same time.

During this time of Christian history the Romans didn't know what to do with the Christians, but they were seen as godless, immoral cannibals. They refused to worship the emperor, so in this sense they were spiritually bankrupt, and on top of that they celebrate this weird ritual of eating the body and blood of Jesus.

Our world will find our morality, our worship, our charity to be distasteful because they do not understand our Jesus.

There will be wonderful times where the world will stand and applaud the fruits of gospel conduct, and in those moments we rejoice that God would be glorified as such. And we should seek to bring this beauty of the gospel into every area of life and hope that it is seen as such.

But we should also know there will be times where despite the beauty of our works, we will be resisted, minimized and even persecuted.

But in those times we realize the wonderful distinction of a gospel-centered approach to culture. We don't trust in culture's acceptance of us. We trust in God's glory over all things. This doesn't stop us from living out our salvation because we do not work for culture's acceptance, but for God's glory.

You see gospel-realists recognize two wonderful truths in this culture war. It first recognizes the reality that the culture of our heart and the culture of our world will still wrestle with our Jesus in this already-but-not-yet period.

And yet secondly, it seeks to do the costly work of living out, boldly, and honorably our new identity in Jesus; trusting that we are beloved in this mess, and that God will work for his glory through our private and public lives.