

A LIFE OF DISTINCTION

SERIES: FLOURISH: HOPE IN A STRANGE LAND



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1 Peter 4:1-11
Tenth Message
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Maybe you remember when good photos were difficult to take. Several years ago, when my children were little, I received a nice camera as a gift. I was fascinated with my ability to take pictures that featured a good depth of field shots. Those are the pictures where the background is blurred out.

I would take picture after picture of my children's faces. You would have thought I was assembling a headshot portfolio for them. I loved seeing their faces and capturing their smiles. I fancied myself artistically when they were looking to the side, or I caught them against a cool background.

We love pictures like that because it's how our eyes work. We don't focus on everything all at once. We see one thing clearly, and everything else fades away. That function allows us to focus on what's important. One part of the picture stands out from the rest.

We're moving toward the end of the book of 1 Peter in our series called "Flourish." There are a few weeks left, but Peter reaches a kind of climactic conclusion in our passage for this morning. He helps us to see how following Jesus allows us to live the kind of life that stands out from the rest. He shows us a life of distinction.

The person who truly flourishes stands out against the background of the rest of this world.

That sounds great until you remember that being different than everyone around you is often uncomfortable and even disorienting. It's difficult to be the "only one" who thinks a certain way. It's challenging to maintain your perspective when everyone around you says that it's wrong.

If you live like that, you start to feel alone. You even begin to question yourself. Who am I? Why don't I fit? Why does everyone else seem to think one way and I think another? Given enough time, your whole sense of identity can be shaken.

I know that some of you know this feeling well. Some of you are the only Republican in a family of Democrats. Some of you are the only Democrat in a family of Republicans. Some of you are often the only woman in a room full of men, or the only person of color in an otherwise white crowd.

Several of you feel like you don't fit in Silicon Valley. Or you don't fit in at your jobs. Some of you feel like you don't fit in here at PBC.

In our passage this morning, Peter has some things to say about that feeling. First, he tells us that when you become a follower of Jesus, you often face this feeling of not fitting in. To choose faith is to choose to be different from the world in which we live. That sense of not fitting in is a painful one. But Peter also gives us some perspective on how to face that challenge. He helps us to flourish in the midst of the discomfort.

What Peter gives us can be summarized by three different mindsets. He gives us three ways to think which equip us for living this life of distinction. We're already familiar with most of these, but they are a critical reminder. Peter reminds us to have a Jesus mindset, an eternal mindset, and a one another mindset.

Jesus mindset

Our passage starts with the words "Since therefore," so before we begin, it's helpful to look back at the previous passage to see from what Peter is transitioning. He probably has in mind his statement from 1 Peter 3:18, where he said, "Christ suffered for sins once for all." He went on to describe how Christ's suffering for sin resulted in his complete victory over evil.

Based on that, Peter returns to the theme of our own suffering.

1 Peter 4:1-4:

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, 2 so as to live for the rest of the time in the flesh no longer for human passions but for the will of God. 3 For 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. 4 With respect to this they are surprised when you do not join them in the same flood of debauchery, and they malign you;

Peter says that his readers should prepare themselves to suffer. He tells them to “arm yourselves with the same way of thinking” as Christ did. It’s not immediately clear what he means by the phrase “whoever has suffered in the flesh has ceased from sin.” There are a few different views on what Peter is saying.

I think the most compelling explanation is to understand a connection between ceasing from sin and suffering. It becomes more apparent as the passage continues. Peter is talking about the suffering that happens when you stop sinning the way everyone around you is sinning. It’s that feeling of not fitting in. It seems like you’re the only one trying to live by certain values.

Followers of Jesus wouldn’t participate in living in sensuality, drunkenness, orgies, drinking parties so that they would be on the outside. Their peers would exclude them and speak poorly of them. We suffer when we don’t participate in the culture around us. When we opt out of the sins of our culture, we experience a unique kind of suffering. We suffer when we don’t participate in the culture around us.

I’ve experienced this in many ways throughout my life. In college, I lived with a group of non-Christians. I learned how uncomfortable it is to be the only sober one at a college party. Later on, when I worked for Oracle, we had a huge conference in New Orleans during the week of Mardi Gras. There were plenty of activities that my coworkers participated in that I opted out of.

For me, this sense of being different hasn’t usually been about the kinds of activities that Peter describes here. He talks about passions, drunkenness, and orgies. Those aren’t temptations for me at this point in my life. But the last word that Peter uses helps us to see the heart of what he’s saying. He summarizes with the phrase “lawless idolatry.” With that phrase, we realize that we aren’t just talking about behavior, we’re talking about worship.

We suffer when we worship something other than what our culture worships. In the first century, the worship of idols involved orgies and passions and drunkenness. Worship for our culture is very different.

There are a few things people in this area tend to worship. You might say money or success or achievement. One way to look at it is that people here worship impact. Our culture worships the idea of “making a difference.” A Salon article from 2018 asks “Why so many tech workers worship their CEOs.”¹ It’s because that’s the Silicon Valley dream—starting something in your garage that changes the world. To have an impact. To become someone. This perspective is why we worship Steve Jobs and Elon Musk and Jeff Bezos. Not for their money or success, but for their impact.

If we count ourselves as followers of Jesus, we don’t worship impact. That cannot be what drives us. We worship a poor middle eastern carpenter who lived as a refugee under a foreign kingdom and was executed by the earthly powers of his day.

You can argue that Jesus had a vast spiritual impact, and you would be right. All of history hinged on his life. But few of us are driven by an obsession for spiritual influence. We live in a culture that worships impact here on earth, and it is so easy for us to fall into that trap. We have to arm ourselves with the mindset of Christ. Peter calls it “living for the rest of the time no longer for human passions but for the will of God.”

It’s difficult to live without worshiping impact. You feel unimportant. You feel second-class. You feel that loving your family and serving God isn’t enough. You’re supposed to do more. You’re supposed to be more.

The way we walk through that suffering is to have a Jesus mindset.

For students, it may mean that your grades are not your top priority. For young adults, it may mean that you don’t pursue the most lucrative job because you need margin in your life for ministry. If you’re a married couple raising a family, it may mean that one of you doesn’t work as much as you possibly can because you value the calling of being a parent.

These kinds of decisions make us feel out of place because we worship something different than our culture. I talk to a lot of people who feel like they don’t belong here, so they move away. Sometimes God is

calling people to move. But I always feel sad when the very people we need to stay so that we can be the church here move away to a place where they fit in better.

It's hard to live here without worshipping impact. It's challenging to live here and worship Jesus. It leads to suffering, but we are called to suffer. Peter's next point helps to put our suffering in perspective.

Eternal mindset

Peter continues by demonstrating how the way followers of Jesus look at the scope of our lives helps us to endure that suffering. Peter references the people from culture who malign followers of Jesus.

1 Peter 4:5-7:

They will give account to him who is ready to judge the living and the dead. 6 For this is why the gospel was preached even to those who are dead, that though judged in the flesh the way people are, they might live in the spirit the way God does. 7 The end of all things is at hand; therefore be self-controlled and sober-minded for the sake of your prayers.

Peter begins by reminding his readers that those Gentiles who mock them will have to give an account to "him who is ready to judge" as will every human being. This life is not all there is, and nobody gets away with anything; there is a judge.

At first, the idea of someone "who is ready to judge the living and the dead" may seem frightening. The reality is that we all crave someone who can tell us what is true and good. We have lost confidence in all of our earthly systems: our politicians, corporate leaders, teachers, even pastors. We don't know who to trust. I saw a recent social media post that asked, "who's going to fact check the fact-checkers?"

We are always tempted to only pay attention to the people and ideas which are right around us. When we suffer even though we don't deserve it, we're confused and discouraged. When things around us look like they are falling apart, we lose hope. We need to be reminded of this judge. Our eyes need to be drawn up to God away from all the voices of this world.

Our eyes always need to be drawn forward into eternity. Peter is trying to do this when he says that "the gospel was preached even to those who are dead."

He's not saying the gospel is preached to people who are currently dead. Instead, he's saying that it was preached to people who used to be alive but are now dead. He says they were judged in the flesh the way everyone is—that is, they died—but they now live in the spirit the way God does.

They still exist! They have the kind of life God has. This was a radical idea, even in the first century. They didn't believe in the kind of eternal life that Jesus preached. Their whole focus on life was on this life—what happened here and now. Peter's point is to extend our mindset. To stretch it from only seeing this life to seeing all of eternity.

"The end of all things is at hand." Do you believe this? I know, it sounds crazy. This statement makes us sound like those apocalyptic people standing on street corners waving a sign that says "The End of the World Is Near." But friends, this is what Jesus taught. The end of the world is near!

We must have this eternal mindset. It's one of the paradoxes of being a Christian. The way to flourish here is not to think about this life, but about eternity. We can have an eternal mindset.

Most people in our culture believe one of two things about history. They either think that the world is falling apart, and we need to return to the glory days of the past, or they believe that progress is being made and that human accomplishments will lead us to a glorious future.

Just consider the two slogans of our recent Presidential candidates. The Republican slogan said we need to "Make America Great Again." The Democratic slogan promised that "Our Best Days Still Lie Ahead."

Here, in Silicon Valley, people tend toward the future perspective. We are surrounded by the message that technology will save us. We think that because computers are getting faster and machines are getting smarter that the world is getting better.

A recent article in *The Independent*, a British magazine argues that we aren't. The title says it all: *Despite Appearances, the Idea of Social Progress Is a Myth.*²

A Christian view of history doesn't fit either of those categories. The biblical story is not an arc of incremental progress which brings in a better and better world. The Christian story speaks of the purposes of God, played out

across the tapestry of history. It's a story of faithfulness, of a spiritual kingdom on earth, of a dramatic and violent climax to history followed by an eternity of a fully redeemed and restored creation.

It is different than what conservatives or progressives believe, which is why Christians don't fit into either political camp. As followers of Jesus, we don't look backward, and we don't look forward. We look heavenward.

We look for the kingdom of God to come. When we are lulled into believing that if only we offer internet access to all of the developing world, and build enough shelters for the homeless in our community, and repeal the laws which violate God's command, then things will be better, we have lost our eternal mindset.

It doesn't mean we don't do try to improve life around us. We absolutely do—that's crucial to our calling as representatives of God's mercy. But we don't put our faith in this world to get better. We put our faith in the purposes of God and his kingdom to come.

When you have that kind of a mindset, it becomes a lot easier to weather the storms of suffering in this life.

One another mindset

Peter points us toward one last mindset. He's talked about how we emulate Jesus in our suffering for being distinct. He's given us an eternal mindset to draw our attention away from the chaos of opinions on earth. Now he points us toward each other.

1 Peter 4:8-11a:

Above all, keep loving one another earnestly, since love covers a multitude of sins. 9 Show hospitality to one another without grumbling. 10 As each has received a gift, use it to serve one another, as good stewards of God's varied grace: 11 whoever speaks, as one who speaks oracles of God; whoever serves, as one who serves by the strength that God supplies.

Three times in this conclusion, we hear the phrase "one another." The final mindset that helps us live the life of flourishing is a "one another" mindset.

Peter gives three different areas where we are to relate to one another. First, he encourages us to keep loving one another. Second, he talks about showing hospitality

to one another. Then he wraps up with a beautiful exhortation to serve one another with the spiritual gifts God has given each of us. I want to touch on love and service, but then camp for a bit on hospitality.

The first instruction is "love one another". You've probably heard this phrase before: "love covers a multitude of sins." It doesn't mean that love atones for sins or takes away sin. In any kind of a relationship, simply loving the other person sacrificially goes a huge way toward reconciliation. Perhaps you offended someone, or you've had a political disagreement. Maybe you find yourself distant.

Reaching out in love can work wonders—a kind word; a gift; a significant gesture or expressing gratitude for the friendship. Love is a powerful healer.

Peter closes with "serve one another." We have always believed strongly at PBC that each of us is given spiritual gifts by God to be used in service of the community. Peter is clear: "each has received a gift." You need to know that. If you're a follower of Jesus, you've received a gift to serve the community. Use it! Use it to serve one another.

There are so many ways to serve, especially now as we're moving back into gathering together. There are needs in our tech ministry, student ministry, compassion ministry. It's a weird time with everything that's going on, but you can still use your spiritual gifts. No pandemic can interfere with the work of the Spirit through his people.

The middle command is the one I felt God drawing me toward. "Show hospitality to one another without grumbling." It just so happened that as I was preparing this message, I received an invitation to a webinar on hospitality hosted by The Colossian Forum. The speaker was Christine Pohl, who has written extensively on the topic.

In some ways, it's a strange time to be talking about hospitality since we're mostly restricted to our homes. But the need is larger than ever. So maybe this is God's time for us to develop a vision for hospitality. Here are a few thoughts for us to consider.

First, there is something unique about Christian hospitality. It is more than being nice to people or welcoming people into your home. In the first century, one of the most distinguishing characteristics of the early church was their hospitality.³ This care for each other helped the gospel to spread in a culture where you couldn't get a hotel room when you visited a new city.

What makes hospitality Christian is the character of God himself. God is a Trinity: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. God is himself a community, and he invites us into that love. Jesus says that we can experience the same kind of oneness with him that God experiences within himself. That's the model for hospitality. We have some type of community: a family, a group of friends, a small group, and we invite others into that.

The second idea flows from that. Hospitality is not only about meeting up for lunch with your friends or having another family over for dinner, once we're able to do that again. Hospitality has always been about welcoming the stranger. It's an invitation to the other.

So how do we "show hospitality to one another"? We find the stranger in our midst. We reach out to people we don't know well, maybe people from a different demographic. One of the things I love about Road Crew, our men's ministry, is that younger guys and older guys, who typically wouldn't encounter each other, are mixing. That gives rise to hospitality—mentorship, friendship, crossing age boundaries.

I know this is a strange time for hospitality, so I have two practical suggestions. First, be creative. We are so isolated now. The people who were isolated before are even more isolated. The pandemic does not make hospitality impossible, only harder. Be creative.

Now can also be a time to grow a vision for hospitality in your marriage, your friendships, your housemates, or your small group. Talk about hospitality. Come up with a plan. It doesn't happen naturally. Hospitality has to be intentional. Take time now to develop a vision so that when things get better—and they will get better—you know what you want to do.

We don't live a life of distinction alone. We live it with "one another"—in love, service, and hospitality.

Conclusion

Remember that nice camera I received years ago? All those pictures of my kids with blurred out backgrounds. Many of us can take photos like that with the phones in our pockets now. It's easier to take those kinds of pictures.

I want to suggest that amid the crazy times that we are living in, it's easier for us to live a distinctive life. Honestly, the bar is lower. There is so much hatred, so much division, so much fear of the other everywhere you look. We can be different. We might suffer for it. It's not easy living differently from the culture in which you live.

However, this is the path for the follower of Jesus; it's the way to live a life of flourishing.

Let's close with the final verse of our passage. We'll find the reason behind everything. We don't do this for our sakes. We don't do this to be good Christians. Peter tells us why we live this way in the second half of verse 11, "in order that in everything God may be glorified through Jesus Christ. To him belong glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen."

This is the force which drives the cosmos. The glory of God revealed through his purposes throughout history. In everything, God is glorified through Jesus Christ. We have the opportunity to participate in that process. Having a Jesus mindset, an eternal mindset, and a one another mindset draws us into that river of glory.

To him belong glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen.

Endnotes

- 1 Spencer, Keith A. "Why so many tech workers worship their CEOs," *Salon*. <https://www.salon.com/2018/11/23/why-so-many-tech-workers-worship-their-ceos/>.
- 2 Das, Satyajit Das. "Despite appearances, the idea of social progress is a myth," *The Independent*. <https://www.independent.co.uk/voices/despite-appearances-idea-social-progress-myth-a7867371.html>.
3. Riddle, Donald Wayne. "Early Christian Hospitality: A Factor in the Gospel Transmission." *Journal of Biblical Literature* 57, no. 2 (1938): 141-54. Accessed November 16, 2020. doi:10.2307/3259745.