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How Easter People Are to Live in a Good Friday World: Honorably, Honoring

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TEXT: 1 Peter 2:11-24 (ESV)

Beloved, I urge you as sojourners and exiles to abstain from the passions of the flesh, which wage war against your soul. Keep your conduct among the Gentiles honorable, so that when they speak against you as evildoers, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day of visitation.

Be subject for the Lord's sake to every human institution, whether it be to the emperor as supreme, or to governors as sent by him to punish those who do evil and to praise those who do good. For this is the will of God, that by doing good you should put to silence the ignorance of foolish people. Live as people who are free, not using your freedom as a cover-up for evil, but living as servants of God. Honor everyone. Love the brotherhood. Fear God. Honor the emperor.

Servants, be subject to your masters with all respect, not only to the good and gentle but also to the unjust. For this is a gracious thing, when, mindful of God, one endures sorrows while suffering unjustly. For what credit is it if, when you sin and are beaten for it, you endure? But if when you do good and suffer for it you endure, this is a gracious thing in the sight of God. For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you might follow in his steps. He committed no sin, neither was deceit found in his mouth. When he was reviled, he did not revile in return; when he suffered, he did not threaten, but continued entrusting himself to him who judges justly. He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. By his wounds you have been healed.

An early document dated from 120-140 AD describes to a curious non-believer how Christians are alike and different from other people. He writes,

The difference between Christians and the rest of mankind is not a matter of nationality or language or customs. Christians don't live in separate cities of their own, speak any special dialect, nor practice any eccentric way of life. They pass

ordinary local usage in their clothing, diet, and other habits. Nevertheless, the organization of their community does exhibit some features that are remarkable. For instance, though, they are residents at home in their own countries, their behavior there is more like transients. Though destiny has placed them here in the flesh, they do not live after the flesh. Their days are on earth, but their citizenship is above in the heavens. They obey the prescribed laws, but in their own private lives, they transcend the laws. They show love to all men, though all men persecute them. They are misunderstood and condemned. They are poor, yet making many rich lacking all things, yet having all things in abundance. They repay curses with blessings and abuse, with courtesy for the good they do, they suffer wounds as evildoers.

It's quite an impressive description of the early church, isn't it? What do you suppose this conduct came from? The answer to that question would be from instructions like we read earlier from the Apostle Peter today.

Today's passage begins with Peter telling these believers that they are God's beloved. That's their status before God. In the world, though, they are sojourners and exiles. They're on their way to Heaven and their end-time inheritance. They're strangers. Like the old gospel song says, "I am a pilgrim and a stranger traveling through this wearisome land." But Easter people still are living in a Good Friday world of people that need rescuing – God's rescuing And God has given them the challenge of living in such a way that all people, even highly resistant people, will come to glorify him by trusting and following his son, Jesus Christ, for salvation. In today's text, Peter tells us how that can best happen.

It's all, first of all, in how one conducts himself or herself around other people. First, Peter says it's important to keep your conduct honorable. Hear his words: "Beloved abstain from passions of the flesh which wage war against your soul. Keep your conduct among non-believers honorable so that when they speak against you as evil doers, they may see your good deeds and eventually join you in glorifying God." Peter's pointing out that there still is a war going on within the believers' hearts. The Easter people are saints and sinners saved in Christ and set apart for him, but still prone to sin and give in to the passions of the flesh. "Our self-centered desires in ways that are always crying out to be satisfied," he says. Though everyone around you is giving into those desires, don't you? As Easter, people refrain yourselves from giving into those things. Be God honoring. Maybe Peter was thinking of the passage that Jesus said:

“Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.” Peter also points out that when believers keep their conduct honorable, devoting themselves to good, godly behavior before others, this will not only silence non-believing critics who think and say Christians are nothing but troublemakers, but it might actually win them over to faith in Christ so that they will wind up glorifying God with you when Jesus returns. Peter was probably remembering what Jesus said in one of his talks to his disciples when he said, “You are the light of the world. Let your light so shine before others so that they see your good works and give glory to your Father in Heaven. So how Christians conduct themselves before others does matter. Peter says keep it honorable.

Next, he says, and show honor. He says, be subject for the Lords, which means Jesus's sake to every human institution. You're not a free agent. Don't act like you're above the social order in which you find yourself – live within that order. He says live as people who are free, not using your freedom in Christ as a cover up for doing evil, but for living as servants of God. If you are a believer in Christ, you've been set free from sin and death, right, through his suffering, death and resurrection. But you have not received forgiveness so that you can just go on sinning irresponsibly and unaccountably the rest of your days. Freedom is not the same thing as autonomy. Freedom doesn't mean I am a law unto myself. You are freed to live as servants of God, Peter says, doing good in the Lord's name. Martin Luther once wrote this great statement. He said, “A Christian is the most free lord of all and subject to none. A Christian is the most dutiful servant of all and subject to every one.” He's right. And Peter says, here is how Easter people live that out as called servants of God operating within the social structures in which they find themselves. He says, “Honor everyone,” treat everyone with respect, treat them as valued, precious people created in God's image and died for at the cross by Jesus.

And serve them. We honor the people in our homes. For instance, today in our country, we have a day set aside to remind us to honor our moms who bore us and raised us. Thank you. Thank you, Mom. God gave his people a commandment to honor our fathers and our mothers. And Jesus taught that it was important to keep that commandment as well. We also honor our children even when they may not honor us out of love for them. Michael Brown tells a story in a *Men of Integrity* magazine article. He said a friend told me about a boy who was the apple of his parents' eyes.

Tragically, in his mid-teens, the boy went awry. He dropped out of school and began associating with a bad crowd. One night, he staggered into his house at 3 a.m., completely drunk. His mother slipped out of bed and left her room. The father quickly followed, assuming his wife was in the kitchen crying. But instead, he found her at her son's bedside, softly stroking his matted hair as he lay poured out drunk on the covers. "What are you doing?" The father whispered. The mother answered, "Well, he won't let me love him when he's awake." This mother stepped into her son's darkness with a love and honor that existed, even though he did not love or honor her back.

And Easter people honor everyone outside of the home as well, no matter what their background, color of their skin, political affiliation, or philosophy, status, or religion. That includes your boss, your spouse, your neighbor, your government officials who have authority over you. Everyone, no matter how good or bad they may act towards you, honor them. He specifically says honor the emperor. Treat him with respect. After all, Peter had heard Jesus say, "Give to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's." Now, we must keep in mind that Peter is writing to believers who were living under an oppressive government that looked unfavorably upon Christianity. They were suspicious and hostile towards this new little cult and would even use them as a scapegoat when disasters came upon the land saying it's all their fault. They don't believe like us. Nevertheless. Easter people were to respect the government, Peter says, and live peaceful and righteous lives in their midst. In America, we're fortunate to live in a democracy, but the principle is the same. It's still God's will that his servants be responsible, law abiding, contributing citizens, showing respect even when they may not always agree with the powers that be.

He says, "Love your fellow believers in the church, honor each other as brothers and sisters in Christ loved by Jesus." Peter's remembering when Jesus said a new commandment I give to you: love one another as I have loved you by this all people will know you are my disciples. That kind of honoring conduct serves as an attractive display in a dark world in need of the love of Christ. Interestingly, Peter includes in his list: fear God. Reverence for God is the ultimate authority in your life, is what that means. It means living obedient, too obedient to his will, subject to him above everything and everyone else. He is to be each believer's main audience. And the thing that matters the most is this question: is this action pleasing to God, good in His sight? And God-fearing Easter people may sometimes be uncomfortably confronted with

situations where they will have to choose between obeying God or sinful human demands upon them. It could even lead then to some personal suffering.

I am reminded of Peter's response in Acts 4 to the threats of the authorities and being told to stop evangelizing in Jerusalem. And his response was, "Is it right to listen to you or God? You be the judge, but we're not going to stop doing this." Then they threatened him all the more. And not long after that, he was arrested and thrown in prison to be executed. The Book of Revelation, written by John, who was with Peter that day, is filled with all kinds of apocalyptic messages against the powers that be that were persecuting the church because they refused to recognize and worship Caesar as a god.

So far, then, we can boil down today's instructions from Peter to Easter. People living in a Good Friday world that needs Christ with this one statement: keep your conduct honorable before God and others and live your life honoring everyone. And we know that could lead to all kinds of personal suffering at the hands of others. It makes us easy to be taken advantage of, thanklessly inconvenienced and overlooked. We know this from Scripture, from history, and probably from our own personal experiences. So, one might balk a bit at all this instruction from Peter and wonder why in the world would I choose to live like that? And Peter points all believers then to Jesus in our passage today. He says, "For to this you've been called because Jesus Christ also suffered for you."

Well, Easter people have a divine calling from Christ to live like this. And we live like this. First of all, out of gratitude and love for what Jesus went through, for us to save us. But Easter people also live this way because they know Jesus was leaving an example to copy that they might follow in his footsteps. Easter people like myself need to be reminded that they believe in and follow a suffering servant king, who said to his disciples, "If anyone wants to come after me, let him pick up the cross and follow me." He wants us to walk in his footsteps, to be cross bearers, not only living for him, but living like him. As imperfect as that may be, because of our sinful imperfections, we live like him giving ourselves away for the sake of others. The suffering of Jesus was a sacrifice for us to trust, but also was an example for us to follow as Easter people.

Peter then gives a description of how Jesus suffered. He committed no sin, no deceit was found in his mouth. He didn't deserve what he got. When he was reviled, he didn't revile in return. There was no retaliation on his part when they scourged and ridiculed

him. He could have called down an angel army, but he didn't. When he suffered, there were no threats coming from his lips. In fact, he continued, just entrusting himself to God who judges justly. He himself was bearing our sins in his body on the tree, Peter says that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. By his wounds, you've been healed. Jesus took our sins upon himself at the cross and took the punishment for sin that we were meant to receive. And here's why: that we might die to sin, be set free and live to righteousness. Believers receive this new righteousness before God through Christ. He sees them as He sees Jesus. They're dead to sin and devoted to being righteous for God, seeking first His kingdom and his righteousness. And in all of his suffering. Peter is pointing out Jesus was acting redemptively for our sake, for the sake of hostile sinners. He was fulfilling God's plan to atone for the sins of a sinful humanity in order to forgive and restore all people into a saving relationship with God.

Now Easter, people cannot redeem or atone for sin with our suffering at the hands of others, as Jesus did. Of course not. He was the sinless one, the perfect sacrifice. But Easter people can follow in his footsteps and act redemptively. If you are a believer in Christ by the Holy Spirit's power, you can choose to follow in his footsteps, keeping your conduct honorable before others like Jesus. Doing good works and choosing to be a servant to others like Jesus. Honoring all people like Jesus. Being long suffering and forgiving towards those who hurt you like Jesus.

Why? So that non-believers might meet their redeemer through us and be moved to faith in Christ. Pastor Colin Smith tells a wonderful story about a Christian brother of his named Vashan. He was born in a small village in north India. He fled from an abusive home and was taken in by a Christian family who eventually led him to faith in Christ. There was no church in Vashan's home village, so he formed a small team of colleagues and began to preach the gospel there. Resistance to the team was strong. The villagers shouted warnings and threats. Then one day, a crowd gathered with stones and drove Vashan and his team out of the village. The last time Smith visited with Vashan, he was a sick man. He says:

I sat at the side of Vashan's bed and was deeply moved as he told me that he had received a visit from the leader of his home village who had personally apologized for the way he had been treated. He then asked Vashan if he would begin a Christian ministry in the village and even offered land that could be used for building a Christian hospital. By any standard, this was a remarkable change of attitude in a community that had shown itself resistant to the Gospel. Vashan

had no doubt as to how this change happened: Christian believers continued to show love, kindness and mercy toward the villagers, and those works had opened a door for their words about Christ.

Amen.