



TWO REALITIES THAT SHOULD CHANGE OUR LIVES

I Peter 4:1-11

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Christian author Ron Sider has a new book out called, “The Scandal of the Evangelical Conscience: Why Are Christians Living Just Like the Rest of the World?” In that book, Sider draws on studies, polls, and statistics to demonstrate that evangelical Christians are as likely to embrace lifestyles every bit as hedonistic, materialistic, self-centered, and sexually immoral as the world in general.

There’s another book that’s a little older that had the same concerns. It’s the Bible. All the way through the Old Testament, God lamented that the people of Israel behaved like just the unredeemed nations around them.

Do you know what? Our church isn’t going to settle for being Christians who live like the world and who live in sin. Our church is about coming together on a weekly basis to encounter God in a powerful way in worship so that when we leave here, we’re about living changed lives. We’re not going to live the way we used to live before we met Jesus.

Church, I can’t say it any plainer than this. If you call your-self a Christian, your life should be different in two respects. It should be different than the life you used to lead before you met Christ. And it should be different from the world around you. A Christian in the New Testament sense is someone who meets Jesus and is never the same.

READ I Peter 4:1-11. In our passage today, there are two realities that produce changed lives. If they’re both present, your life will be different. If they’re absent, you might call yourself a Christian, you might go to church, you might do some religious things, but your lifestyle will be pretty much lived and tuned to the things and conduct of this world. It won’t be distinctly different.

Peter talks about two realities can transform your life. I want you to know what they are. I want you to remember them. And I want them to make a difference in how you live.

Reality #1—Practicing a converted life (vss. 1-6).

True conversion must become a reality in our lives. I’m not talking about practicing a religious life. I’m talking about practicing a converted life. I’m talking living a life that’s different from your past and the world around you. I’m talking about a life that’s obedient to the teachings of the Bible seven days a week.

You see, salvation is about two major things. First, it’s about salvation from sin. It’s about getting right with God—having our sins forgiven and receiving everlasting life from God by faith in Christ. That happens in a moment of time.

Second, it’s about salvation from self. It’s about God delivering us from our old habits, practices, opinions that are contrary to the will of God. That takes a lifetime. I fear that too often, salvation for us is about getting to heaven rather than transformed lives here on earth. It’s this second aspect of salvation I’m talking about today.

I grew up in a Christian home. I’ve been around religion all my life. In second grade, on a Wednesday afternoon in an after-school Bible study for kids, I accepted Christ as my Savior. Nothing really changed even though I was a pretty good kid. One Sunday night in seventh grade, I gave my heart to Christ again in a church revival meeting.

Nothing really changed. But one night in June just after my junior year in high school, I got converted in an old-fashioned tent revival. I made a decision for Christ again but this time, my life was changed. It's never been the same. That's the difference between being religious and being converted.

In verses 1-6, Peter talks about three things that will help us to practice a converted life. If you do these things, you'll see your life change before your very eyes.

1. Determine to use suffering as a deterrent from sin (vss. 1-2).

We learn a purpose for suffering in verses 1-2 that's new in this book. Actually, it's a twist on suffering that we rarely think about. Here it is—suffering can help us not to sin. Most of us don't think in these terms—that suffering can play a role in helping us to have victory over sin in order to do the will of God. But that's what these verses are teaching. If we allow it, suffering can keep us from sin.

Before us in verse 1 is a very difficult phrase to understand—"he who has suffered in the flesh has ceased from sin". Here's why it's difficult. We know many people who have suffered who haven't ceased from sin. Sometimes suffering has caused them to sin. And I'm one of them.

Some people say that this verse means that if you suffer to the point of death, you cease from sin. Well, that would be true of everyone. Once you die, your sinning is over! It can't have this meaning because verse 2 talks about continuing to live "in the flesh" for the will of God. Some say that this is a reference to the moment we believe in Christ. At that point, Romans 6 says that we suffer and die with Christ on the cross in order to rise again to newness of life. But again, no Christian actually ceases from sin after that. We're all going to sin until the day Jesus calls for us.

What I think this is teaching here is that you don't have to sin during suffering if you do what Christ did—arm yourself for the purpose of suffering. The word "arm" means "to suit up as a soldier". Before suffering and during suffering, we have to make a decision—since Christ went through suffering and did not sin, we will prepare ourselves to do the same thing. He was able to do the will of God in suffering and cease from sin. And that must be our same goal. We must be as determined as Christ not to sin.

If you don't think that way about suffering, you'll probably sin. But if you think that, by the power of God, you can still do the right thing no matter who or what may be against you, you can rise above sin. That must be our constant goal. When you can keep from sinning during suffering, you know you're more than religious; you know you're converted!

Here's the second thing that will help us to practice a converted life:

2. Live for the will of God and not your lusts (vss. 2-3).

Unconverted people live for their bodily appetites. Converted people live for God. You can't miss that in verses 2-3. If we're alive, we all have the same problem—the lusts of the flesh. The lusts of the flesh are the appetites of the body which demand gratification outside the will of God. There's a little list of these lusts in verse 3—sensuality, passions, drunkenness, orgies, drinking parties, and degrading idolatry. The underlying theme in all these lusts is socially inappropriate and uncontrolled indulgence that moves towards illicit sexual behavior.

Not much has changed over the centuries, huh? Do you know what these lusts or "desire of the Gentiles" in verse 3 describe in America? I'll give you a little list. The American college campus with its most prolific expression being spring break. The adult bar and party scene. The Hollywood entertainment industry that visits our homes and theatres across the country. And cultural festivals like Mardi Gras. We're talking about millions of Americans involved in the things of verse 3.

We may not always see it in such extreme forms. But we see it in the pronounced sexual permissiveness of our society. Our sexual craving as a nation has overthrown the laws of God. Uncontrolled lusts are a cancer. My fear is not so much what terrorists and other enemies "out there" might do to us. The seeds of our undoing in this country will be our own lusts gone wild.

We might be saying, “We don’t do those things.” Maybe not. But we all fight our demons of lust. We all want self-gratification in some form. The converted life says, “Before I met Christ, I lived for my own passions. That was more than enough sinning. From now on, I’m not going to live to gratify the desires of my body outside the law of God, I’m going to live for the will of God (vss. 2-3).”

By the way, the will of God here is our holiness or our sanctification. It’s living a life of obedience and purity and character and integrity with our mind set on the Spirit and not on the flesh. Living for the will of God is difficult because the lusts of the flesh in us are so strong. What was said in Genesis 4:7 is true of every one of us, “Sin is crouching at the door and its desire is for you. But you must master it.” Unconverted people give in to their lusts. Converted people rule over their lusts.

The Bible doesn’t classify lusts this way, but we in churches tend to have two categories of lusts—“somewhat okay lusts” and “really bad lusts”. We saw some of the “really bad lusts” in verse 3. Most of us are going to stay away from the really bad lusts. But we may engage in the “somewhat okay lusts.” Converted living is about dealing with both kinds.

I don’t really have a problem with the “really bad lusts.” I’d be out of a job pretty fast if I did. But I’ll be candid with you. I have trouble with “somewhat okay lusts.” Let me give you an example—“comfort food.” Any time my body thinks about food, I want to snack. So I go for something sweet. When I’m done with that, I think, “You know, I need some-thing salty to counteract the sweet.” And the cycle goes on.

Especially if it’s been a long, hard day. On the way home, my body is saying, “After the day you had, you deserve a reward.” You see, that’s unconverted thinking. This is an area of lust I have to master. We all have things like this to deal with. It could be shopping, sports, hobbies, power. It’s part of our continual, lifelong conversion to Christ. We’ve got to deal with our lusts, which are very present and very powerful, in order to live for the will of God.

There’s a third thing that will help us to live a converted life:

3. Change your friends if need be (vss. 4-7).

The Apostle Paul said something that’s absolutely true in I Corinthians 15:33, “Do not be deceived, bad company corrupts good morals.” Author Tony Campolo said it a little differently, “Ice cream won’t spoil manure but manure will spoil ice cream.” If you hang out with the wrong crowd, they’ll drag you down. But when you really get converted, you stop doing the wrong things you did with your friends. You even stop running with them (vs. 4). Before long, they’re going to think you’re weird and say some bad things about you. Verse 4 is so true.

Remember the tent meeting revival in which I got converted? For several years before that, I ran with a group of guys that were involved in some pretty bad stuff. I’ve told my kids some of those stories—I’m not going to tell you. But I tried to hang out with those guys after my conversion and I found I couldn’t keep doing what they were doing. They wondered what was wrong with me. By the end of that summer, I discovered I wasn’t doing anything with them anymore. I had a new set of converted friends.

When I went back to school in the fall, some of the guys gave me a hard time. They mocked me and called me names. It hurt. But I was different and I couldn’t go back to the old ways. Had I stayed with the old gang, I really think I would have reverted to my old ways and I think I would have missed God’s call to the ministry. Because within three months of my conversion to Christ, God called me unmistakably into the pastorate.

I understood verse 5 at that time. It says that those who live for their lusts and malign the converted will give an account to the Lord some day. No one will escape that judgment. I didn’t want any of them to face the Lord in their unconverted state. So I began to talk to each of them about what had happened to me. When I went off to college, I wrote them letters. I didn’t have one break-through. I got a lot of laughs and ridicule.

But a number of years ago, one of those guys stumbled across my path. His name is Dave. We did a lot of bad things together. We parted company when I got converted and after graduation, I never saw him again. But I had

planted seeds. He told me that several years after graduation, he not only came to Christ, he went as a missionary to a country in Europe. That was the last thing I ever expected to hear!

Where do converted people come from? People who live for their lusts. When they get converted, they change and they can't hang out with the old crowd anymore. They may get scorned for it, but God is still at work. If you must separate from the wrong kind of friends, pray for their salvation. You don't want any of them facing the judgment seat of Christ without it. Some of them may meet Christ.

Verse 6 we'll save for another time. It's another one of those very difficult to understand verses. It's a very interesting verse, but it's kind of parenthetical in nature. I commend it to your personal study.

Well, the first reality is this. Your life as a Christian won't change unless you practice a converted life in the power of the Holy Spirit. I'm calling you to practice a converted life.

Here's the second reality of a transformed life.

Reality #2—Accepting the fact that we're living in the last days and allowing that to change how we live (vss. 7-11).

It's time to realize that we're living in the last days. That's reality! Look at verse 7. It says, "The end of all things is at hand." This is something we don't think about much these days. It's my sense that the church isn't looking too intently for the coming of the Lord. I think we've gotten pretty comfortable in this world and we think we're going to be here a long time. But frequently, the New Testament tells us that we're in the last days and to be ready for the Lord's return. And Peter says this should be significant motivation to live for the will of God rather than the lusts that used to control us before conversion.

We have another interpretive problem in verse 7. How could Peter be telling his readers in the 1st Century that the end of all things is near and almost 2000 years have come and gone since then and Christ hasn't yet returned?

Peter addresses this problem in II Peter 3:3-4. He says, "In the last days, mockers will come...following after their own lusts and saying, 'Where is the promise of His coming?'" He then explains in verses 9-10 that the Lord doesn't reckon time as we do and that He's not slow about His promise to come again. He's being patient so more people can come to repentance.

Church, we need to believe that we're living in the last days and not question God's clock. I'm convinced the time is shorter than we think. We're seeing things in our lifetime that the world has never seen before—the explosion of things like knowledge, travel, technology, medicine, communication, population, commerce, and sin. We're living in unprecedented days. There are no more signs in the Bible that await fulfillment for Christ's return. That's the next thing on God's calendar.

I John 3:3 says, "Everyone who has this hope fixed on Him purifies himself even as He is pure." What hope was John talking about? The appearing of Christ! Friends, when you really believe Christ is going to come back and it could be soon, it will change the way you live.

Peter maps out in verses 7-11 how that hope translates into personal living. It's going to make a difference in two areas:

1. Spiritual wisdom (vs. 7).

If you know it's the last days, you'll look at what's going on with spiritual eyes. Verse 7 says you'll have "sound judgment". You won't be swept away with the world's values and wisdom. You won't live like this world is your home. You'll understand the attacks against the doctrines of the Bible and the removal of God from the public square. People can't at the same time live for themselves and be accountable to God. So we live in a day of relativism in which people define their own truth and dethrone God.

Peter also tells us to be "sober". That means we're not to come under the influence of anything that would control us other than the Holy Spirit—from alcohol to addictions to career to possessions to recreation to reputation to power.

And we're to be people of prayer. Sound judgment and sobriety will draw us to prayer. Actually, the word in verse 7 is "prayers". I think we've lost something since biblical days. People had regular times throughout the day dedicated for prayer. Few of us do. But I'll tell you, if we ever needed the people of God on their knees, it's now.

Friends, when we accept the fact that we're living at the end of all things, it'll change our spiritual lives. But it will also make a huge difference in another area.

2. Our relationships with Christians (vss. 8-11).

Before we were converted, we lived for ourselves and our passions. But after we get converted, we're to live for others and their wellbeing. Peter says that if we realize that these are the last days and that Jesus is coming again, it'll make a difference in how we treat fellow Christians. I'm talking about any Christians we know—in our family, in this church, in the neighborhood, at school, and at work.

These verses are incredibly important for Christian relationships. If families, marriages, and churches would practice what Peter says here, relationships would be transformed. The main idea is in verse 8, "Above all, keep fervent in your love for one another." The word "fervent" means "to stretch and strain". Peter is talking about working really hard at our love for one another. Half-hearted effort won't do it. This love is not just having a warm feeling. It's about making strong efforts to treat each other right. How do we keep our love strong for fellow Christians? Peter gives us three important "musts":

1. We must overlook each other's sins (vs. 8; cf. Prov. 10:12). Peter says that love covers a multitude of sins. Does that mean that we allow and condone sin to go on in other's lives? No, not at all. It means that we don't let the faults and failures of others get in the way of our relationship and separate us. We overlook offenses and forget them. Otherwise, we begin to put every action of someone under suspicion and conflicts abound. Satan just loves it. We must be quick to forgive and realize that we have a boatload of sins others must overlook in us.

Here's the second relational must:

2. We must be very friendly to people without complaint (vs. 9). Each of us needs to look at ourselves as hosts and hostesses who make people feel right at home. We should overwhelm people with our hospitality. And what we say needs to be positive. We're not to go around complaining about how hard we work at it or picking apart what we don't like about people and things.

After all the bad weather we had recently, Marie graciously pointed out something to me. She said, "You're turning into a whiner." It was starting to erode the atmosphere of love and friendliness between us.

The same thing is true at church. When you come here, be hospitable and friendly to everyone you meet. Don't complain to people. It does something negative to worship and to people. Let me tell you something that's not good for me, for instance. To come to a service ready to minister and to have people complain about this and that before I begin.

There's a time to voice complaints. You have to know those times at home and church. Maybe we should call special "Whine and Cheese" events so we all know when to complain. Otherwise, let's go out of our way to be friendly to each other without complaint.

3. We must minister to each other with our spiritual gifts (vss. 10-11). Actually these verses are worth a whole sermon. But the important thing I want you to see is that God has given each of us a special spiritual capacity to enrich someone else's life. No one is left out.

When we serve another person with that gift, whether at church or during the week, we show them love because we enrich them, whether it be by speaking something to them on God's behalf or whether it be by helping them in some very practical way (vs. 11). God doesn't give us any spiritual gifts to use on ourselves. He gives us gifts

so we can show love to each other in very real and powerful ways. And when we show this kind of love, we glorify God (vs. 11b; cf. Matt. 5:16)!

SHAPE is a class we want everyone at Grace to eventually take. You'll learn about the gift God has given you and how to employ it in serving others as good stewards of the manifold grace of God. Pastor Derek teaches it. When you see it offered, take it.

I want to share an opinion after being in the ministry for 31 years. These relational "musts" that Peter sets forth here are weak in our homes and churches. Lots of husbands and wives don't treat each other this way. And our churches aren't places of incredible love. They're often places of well-dressed strangers and acquaintances who co-mingle until someone rubs them the wrong way and then they're off to another church.

Our families and churches ought to be the two places on earth where love is experienced the most. If we can remember that everyday we're getting closer to the return of Jesus, we'll be much more likely to show fervent love to each other. We need that kind of love now more than ever!

Conclusion

Christians are people who claim to know Jesus as personal Savior and Lord. If we make that claim, there should be evidence of a changed life. Peter says that there are two realities that will help make that happen. The first is getting converted as well as saved. And the second is having a sense of living in the end times.

I want Grace Church to be a community of people where these two realities lead to lives that are being radically transformed. This kind of change isn't automatic or easy. So I want Grace to be a place where you can struggle with your problems as long as your commitment is life change. The last thing I want is for Grace to be a place where you can call yourself a Christian, do a little religion here on the weekend, and live like the rest of the world the rest of the week.

This week I got a letter from someone in our church who's newly converted. He's trying to stop carrying out the desires of the flesh so he can live the rest of his life for the will of God. He's really struggling so he went to a place where he's getting some help. With his permission I read an excerpt from his letter:

"I've been trying to turn my will over every day and do God's will. It's hard. I ran on self-will for 34 years. But the truth is, as I do it and approach certain situations day by day and come to a desire of either doing His will or being selfish and choosing mine, I'm noticing blessings coming when I do choose His will in certain situations that would not have happened if I did my will. Do I struggle? Yes. But I'm making progress and my faith is growing in Him because of His grace."

This person isn't satisfied to be a Christian in name only. He wants to live a changed life and leave the old ways behind. I believe there are some people here today that might need to become serious like this person about how you're living your lives if you call yourself a Christian. You need to make a change. You need to be converted. You need to realize that the time of this age is growing short.

Will you leave here the way you came in today or will you do something about it? I'm going to ask you to make a decision to follow Christ in a new way and not to turn back from it. You've already lived long enough for yourself and your passions. It's time to live for the will of God.