

MINISTRY BY MAIL
Lutheran Conference of Confessional Fellowship
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Seventh Sunday after Trinity, July 22, 2012

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(Hymns found in The Lutheran Hymnal, CPH, 1941)

Hymns: 377:1-6, 401, 421, 417, 49.

Lessons: Isaiah 55:10-11, Galatians 5:16-26, Matthew 5:10-15.

Sermon Text: 1 Peter 2:11-12.

Sermon by Pastor Robert Mehltritt

In the name of Jesus Christ, Dear Fellow Redeemed,

We are faced with choices every day. Many of those choices tempt us to do evil. You just heard Peter urging, encouraging us, his Christian friends, to abstain from sinful desires and to live good lives. The word abstain means to keep away from, to stay away from, to avoid, to choose to have nothing to do with.

Abstain from sinful desires and live good lives. That is easy to say, but so hard to live. But we need this kind of encouragement on a regular basis to stay spiritually healthy. After all, we are in a war. The evil desires of our sinful nature seek to overcome and destroy the Christian in us.

The unbelieving world with its values is all around us and seeks to overwhelm us and distort our values which we have learned from the Word of God.

The people of God need to be exhorted to keep away from sins, from all sin. And fleshly lusts, sinful desires, are destructive to man's soul. Please listen carefully as

PETER BEGINS HIS ADMONITIONS TO LIVE AS CHILDREN OF GOD

1. *“Abstain from sinful desires, which war against your soul.”*
2. **Live so that the world may glorify God because of what they see in you.**

Because Christians are aliens, strangers, pilgrims in this world, and are looking forward to their real home in heaven, they will certainly not want to endanger their hope of salvation by yielding to their fleshly lusts. The children of this world, the unbelievers, are governed and ruled by their evil desires. They perform the will of the flesh. But the Christians, instead of permitting their flesh, their old sinful nature, to rule them and to lead them into sins, will fight an unceasing war against the lusts of their flesh. For they know that these evil, godless desires battle against the soul. If the lusts of the flesh take over in the heart of a Christian, then his soul, his true life in and with God, is lost. Under no circumstances, therefore, dare Christians heed the tempting voice of the charmers who present the sins of the flesh as a harmless gratification of natural inclinations. The attitude of the Christians must be that of an altogether uncompromising stand against every form of sin.

Peter addresses his readers as friends. Confessing believers are friends – or ought to be. How sad when members of a congregation do not show proper respect for one another. They are friends, friends in Christ, Christian friends with a common goal, seeking to all live sanctified lives together.

Peter is urging us, encouraging us. He calls us aliens and strangers, for we are simply in this world temporarily. He has previously called believers ‘strangers’ in this world. We need to be reminded of this so that we don’t view the loss of possessions, reputation, even family as a terrible disaster. The Lord could replace such things a hundred times over.

It is so easy to get comfortable here on earth and to spend our time and resources trying to get even more comfortable in this world. Many have commented that having many things – many possessions – is a worse problem than having few. Now of course that is easy to say when one has food, shelter, clean water, and a reasonable measure of earthly peace. We are not people starving under totalitarian rule of terrorists, but there is great danger in letting possessions – “things” – become the most important part of our lives. Earthly possessions can be a great temptation to abandon what is truly important in our lives – Jesus Christ!

People who learn to see themselves as just passing through their earthly lives are training themselves to think long-term. Satan owns short-term gratification. Long-term thinking ponders the consequences of present actions. As Christians grow in maturity, they learn to say no to the lure of immediate gratification if it will hurt them or hurt other people or hurt their relationship to the Lord.

The words of our text are the introduction of Peter's instruction for godly living in the next couple of chapters.

But to live godly lives and abstain from evil – first the lusts, and finally the actions that follow the lusts and thoughts of the heart is not easy. To do those kinds of things goes against our sinful nature.

We admit that we are poor worthless sinners – worthless before God because of our sins. But God sent his only-begotten Son to redeem us from our sins and make us his children through faith in Jesus Christ. That makes us precious in God's sight. But in Christ we died to sin. How can we live in it any more? Though we will never reach perfection, God rightly expects to see growth. The Holy Spirit, working through Word and sacrament, enables that growth. To live as God's children is difficult. But Paul wrote to the Philippians: "***I can do everything through him who gives me strength.***" (Philippians 4:13) We can't do it by ourselves. But we can do it with God's help.

We are not of the world but we live in it. The admonition is to stay away from not just wicked deeds, but desires, attitudes of the heart! They fight against your soul. There are soul-destroying ideas every where, in all the world: people with whom we must spend our days, newspapers, magazines, entertainment, classrooms, our leisure and athletic activities, our leaders in this world.

Unbelieving neighbors and people in the world in general are watching you. They may not agree with your values and may bitterly attack them with great hatred. But they can see honesty, hard work, respect for others, and love for one's family and for all mankind. Your loving and moral life may not convert others to the worship of the true God, but on judgment day they will have to give the true God glory when he returns in judgment. Obedience to God's moral commands is a strong witness to unbelievers. But when Christians do not live lives consistent with what they confess, people in the world rightly say: "I can't hear what you are saying. What you are doing is speaking too loudly."

The distinction between believers and unbelievers must always be obvious. When they see your way of life, even though they may speak against you as if you were evildoers, the goal is that they glorify God in the day of visitation. Christians want their conduct to always be in conformity with the will of God. Christians do this by denying and suppressing the lusts of the flesh, and also doing what is good, excellent and approved in the sight of God. The resulting impression upon men will then also accomplish what God wants it to.

When Peter wrote this, the very men who were looking upon the Christians as bad or suspicious characters, as enemies of the government and as addicted to immoral practices, were still open to God changing their hearts by the gospel. Christianity was, at the time this was written, considered an outlaw religion even by the Roman emperor Nero.

Even today, Christians should conduct themselves in all their dealings before men, as they live in the very midst of the heathen, so that their life would be a testimony for them, showing the Gospel in a favorable way. The good works of the Christians, their obediently serving the government, serving their masters, serving their spouses and families, their cheerful readiness to be of service at all times, their self-evident observance of the precepts of God's holy will - all these are bound to make an impression, despite the opposition of an unbelieving world, whether Christians see it or not.

Church history has shown that many an unbeliever who originally considered Christianity a huge fraud has been led to reconsider his first impression by the conduct of the confessing believers. As the unbeliever observed the believers, seeing and becoming acquainted with the good lives of the Christian showed him the injustice of his position. And when the grace of God was then proclaimed to him, when God visited him with the gracious Word of the Gospel, his heart was changed to believe the Christian religion; he accepted its truths, he glorified God, whom he now recognized also as his Father through faith in Jesus. That might be summarized as "actions speak louder than words".

We don't do it just as a show, or to make a point suggesting "I'm better than you". We don't do it to be personally recognized and praised in the world as good neighbors or good people. We do it so that when God approaches people through his Word, they will glorify God and recognize him as Savior.

The power of a holy life speaks for itself, for it speaks of God. If our lives do not show what our words profess, we become frauds and hypocrites. We must live as well as speak the praises of God who called us out of darkness into his marvelous light.

Live good lives – not only in words and deeds others can see – such good lives that pagans may see your good deeds and glorify God. The goal isn't just to praise yourself, but to save them. We struggle and strive to keep away from all fleshly lusts also for the sake of the souls of unbelievers or doubters around us. Christians, believers, want to conduct themselves in their pagan surroundings so that the very thing for which they are slandered may make these slanderers glorify God when he visits them with his grace – before he visits them with his judgment!

Christians are spiritual in their nature and their conduct, no longer fleshly. There is a gulf between them and their neighbors. When the King James Version uses the word "conversation" here it refers to "way of life", to "life", not just to the words we say. Peter is speaking of good, noble conduct or way of life.

Peter's first readers have become outsiders and foreigners to their pagan neighbors. We too, "don't belong" to the sinful world. We have been redeemed, rescued by God and the works of Jesus. Believers have deserted the pagan gods for the true God and have become ***"a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light."*** (1 Peter 2:9) This arouses the hostility of the pagan community.

Yet as a result or outcome of the lives and deeds of believers in Christ when they conduct themselves among their pagan neighbors in a morally good way, when these pagans look upon the God-pleasing behavior of Christians in the world, they will in many cases be so impressed as themselves to be drawn to Christianity, become converted as Peter's readers were converted, and will thus actually glorify God when this day of grace arrives for them. Our gospel lesson today encourages us with the same idea: ***"let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven."*** (Matthew 5:15-16)

The good conduct and works of believers are certainly good compared to pagan standards, although they are surely not perfect according to God's standards. They are not good enough to earn salvation. Jesus' good works and death did that. The good works of true believers have a strong missionary power. Deeds that are done by consistent conduct speak louder than words. Deeds that reinforce doctrine, the gospel in both Word and life, draw men to God through Jesus Christ. And the opposite is true. Worldly "Christians" hinder missionary work, especially among the people they live and work with.

John proclaims a similar idea in this way in 1 John 2:15-18: ***"Do not love the world or anything in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For everything in the world--the cravings of sinful man, the lust of his eyes and the boasting of what he has and does--comes not from the Father but from the world. The world and its desires pass away, but the man who does the will of God lives forever. Dear children, this is the last hour; and as you have heard that the antichrist is coming, even now many antichrists have come. This is how we know it is the last hour."***

Our text leads to admonitions in the following verses and chapters which we will continue to consider in future sermons. For that reason, I want to repeat: ***"Dear friends, I urge you, as aliens and strangers in the world, to abstain from sinful desires, which war against your soul. Live such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us."*** Amen.