

This morning, we are in the fourth week of our sermon series through the New Testament book of 1 Peter, a letter written by the apostle Peter, one of the early church leaders, to a group of Christians scattered throughout Asia Minor, which is modern-day Turkey. I have entitled this sermon series “Stranger,” because one of the main themes throughout this letter is that those of us who believe in Jesus are citizens of heaven, living here as strangers or resident aliens. Our primary identity, values, and hope are not given to us by the culture in which we live but are found in heaven. The letter begins by focusing on who we are as believers in Jesus Christ, then moves on to a section on how we relate to each other in the church, which we looked at last week, and today it moves to a section focusing on how we relate to the world.

1 Peter 2:11-25 - Dear friends, I urge you, as aliens and strangers in the world, to abstain from sinful desires, which war against your soul. ¹² 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. ¹³ Submit yourselves for the Lord's sake to every authority instituted among men: whether to the king, as the supreme authority, ¹⁴ or to governors, who are sent by him to punish those who do wrong and to commend those who do right. ¹⁵ For it is God's will that by doing good you should silence the ignorant talk of foolish men. ¹⁶ Live as free men, but do not use your freedom as a cover-up for evil; live as servants of God. ¹⁷ Show proper respect to everyone: Love the brotherhood of believers, fear God, honor the king. ¹⁸ Slaves, submit yourselves to your masters with all respect, not only to those who are good and considerate, but also to those who are harsh. ¹⁹ For it is commendable if a man bears up under the pain of unjust suffering because he is conscious of God. ²⁰ But how is it to your credit if you receive a beating for doing wrong and endure it? But if you suffer for doing good and you endure it, this is commendable before God. ²¹ To this you were called, because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps. ²² "He committed no sin, and no deceit was found in his mouth." ²³ When they hurled their insults at him, he did not retaliate; when he suffered, he made no threats. Instead, he entrusted himself to him who judges justly. ²⁴ He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness; by his wounds you have been healed. ²⁵ For you were like sheep going astray, but now you have returned to the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls.

Remember, in this passage, Peter is addressing Christians, who were a persecuted minority in the Roman Empire, on how to relate to the world around them. It was not dropped out of the sky to 21st century America. Nevertheless, this passage really challenges our understanding of freedom. Look again at v. 16:

¹⁶ Live as free men, but do not use your freedom as a cover-up for evil; live as servants of God.

You are free, so live as a slave? There is obviously something going on here that is outside the bounds of our world's categories. I believe there are three specific ways this passage challenges our understanding of freedom, and shows us what true freedom really looks like.

1) **Live free from destructive desires**

1 Peter 2:11 - Dear friends, I urge you, as aliens and strangers in the world, to abstain from sinful desires, which war against your soul.

Do not indulge every desire, because some desires are in opposition to your soul, to having the eternal and abundant life that God desires for you. Already, we are seeing a conflict between freedom as our culture defines it and freedom as the Bible defines it. I believe our culture defines freedom essentially as the absence of restriction. In other words, the free person is the one who is free to choose to be or do whatever he or she wants, and nobody can tell them what is right or wrong for them. It is the attitude that says, to quote William Shakespeare: This above all; to thine own self be true. It is the conviction that the most important thing is to look inward, to find out who you truly are and what you truly desire, and then to live that out, no matter what others say. To not let anyone else tell you what you can and can not do, or who you can or can not be.

Charles Taylor called this a mark of the age of authenticity, which he explained this way:

I mean the understanding of life which emerges with the Romantic expressivism of the late-eighteenth century, that each one of us has his/her own way of realizing our humanity, and that it is important to find and live out one's own, as against surrendering to conformity with a model imposed on us from outside, by society, or the previous generation, or religious or political authority.

Another great term for this is “expressive individualism.” As Carl Trueman puts it, “*Expressive individualism particularly refers to the idea that in order to be fulfilled, in order to be an authentic person, in order to be genuinely me, I need to be able to express outwardly or perform publicly that which I feel I am inside.*”

Sound familiar? This attitude seems self-evident to us in America today. We believe that we are basically good people with good desires who should have the right and the freedom to live as we please, without anyone telling us what to do. That in order to be fulfilled and free, we need to be able to follow our inward desires and beliefs and others need to affirm those.

But Peter says this:

1 Peter 2:11 - Dear friends, I urge you, as aliens and strangers in the world, to abstain from sinful desires, which war against your soul.

Again: Peter tells them that not every desire we have is good for us, and as strangers, not everything our culture tells us to do is good for us either. Not everything that is inside of should be listened to and followed. He uses the word **epithumia** in the Greek, literally an “over-desire,” translated here as sinful desires, or in other translations as” passions of the flesh.” And he says that there are some desires inside of us that war against our soul, that are destructive to us, that should not be indulged and followed but are actually the opposite of what would bring us life. In other words, if we believe that true freedom is the absence of restriction, the ability to do whatever we want, to indulge whatever desire we want, then we are missing a very critical element of what freedom actually is.

True freedom, Biblically speaking, is not the absence of restrictions. True freedom comes when you submit to the right restrictions, to the life-giving restrictions. Consider some analogies: Freedom for the **fish** is not going on dry land. What about the bird: freedom for the **bird** is not swimming. Freedom for the **pianist** is not just playing whatever keys they want, but disciplining herself to the rules of the piano until she can freely play anything. Freedom for the **basketball player** is not doing whatever he wants, but submitting himself to the rules of the game and the best possible training until he can do anything on a basketball court. Freedom for the **car owner** is not doing whatever he wants to his car, but submitting to the scheduled maintenance so that the car will perform at its best for a long time. In every area of life, freedom as the absence of restrictions, as the ability to indulge every desire, does not lead to life but to breakdown, to chaos, and to death.

So what is true freedom? True freedom is not the absence of restriction, but submitting to the right restrictions, to the life-giving restrictions. True freedom is living as you were designed to live, as God intended you to live.

¹⁶ *Live as free men, but do not use your freedom as a cover-up for evil; live as servants of God.*

According to Peter, these are the right restrictions: you were created to serve God, to live for Him, to glorify Him and enjoy Him forever. **If that is true, then that means that your authentic self, your true self, your best life, will not be found by searching within and living according to the desires you find in there, but will only be found by looking to God and living according to the will of the one who designed you, as you submit to His design for you and serve Him.**

Because here is the thing about freedom that our world doesn't get. There is no such thing as pure freedom. You will always be serving something.

1 Corinthians 10:12 - *"Everything is permissible for me"-- but not everything is beneficial. "Everything is permissible for me"-- but I will not be mastered by anything.*

Paul says that everything is permissible, but not everything is beneficial, and he will not be mastered by anything. The unexpected twist is that living with the absence of restriction will end up not in freedom from restriction but in slavery to sin, to that which is rebellion against God and against your design.

John 8:34 - *Jesus replied, "I tell you the truth, everyone who sins is a slave to sin.*

Think about it. The more you exercise the freedom to drink, the more you become a slave to that. The more you indulge your sex drive outside of the bounds of marriage, the more you become a slave to that. The more you do any number of things contrary to God's will, the more you become enslaved by that. And the more that our culture becomes one where people seek out freedom as the absence of restriction, the more our nation will devolve into chaos. But the more we find the true freedom that comes submitting to our design and serving God with our life, the more we will find life to the full.

Galatians 5:13 - *You, my brothers, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the sinful nature; rather, serve one another in love.*

But here's the thing about "epithumia." It's not just sinful desires. It is "overdesires." The deeper meaning is that you were created to love God and serve Him supremely. And so desiring anything in this world more than God will make you a slave to that thing or person. When you live for money, or career, or

romantic love, or your children, ultimately your well-being and sense of worth depend upon whether you are succeeding or failing in that area. You are a slave. You are not free. And those masters can not save you, will not give you the life and freedom you were created for. You were created to love and serve God, the one who calls you perfect in His sight and who died for you.

Salvation comes when you come to trust Him and His design for you, that He loves you, that He knows what is best for you, that in Him is found life to the fullest, true freedom for your soul. If you are skeptical about this, remember this message when you follow after your own inward desires and discover that they do not fulfill you the way it was promised.

2) Live free from the judgment of others

¹² 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.

When it comes to freedom, our culture has a strong belief that not only should you be free to live in a way that is right for you, but that others should affirm your choices, and that if they do not affirm you, then they are causing you harm and somehow invalidating your existence. **Others in our culture have a derogatory name for that – snowflakes.** But true freedom doesn't come when everyone affirms your every desire, or when no one is left who disagrees with your choices or thinks you are wrong. Because after all, the day when everyone applauds and affirms you is never going to come, no matter who you are or what you believe or how you live. True freedom comes when your identity is found in who God says you are, and you live to glorify Him, no matter how people respond to you.

¹² 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.

Peter encourages his readers to live their lives to love God and love their neighbor, to live according to His kingdom values. If you do so, there will at times be a clash of values, and there will be some who accuse you of doing wrong. But there will also be some who will see your good deeds and glorify God as they realize that your way of life is life-giving.

Jesus said something similar:

Matthew 5:16 - In the same way, let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven.

True freedom comes not when there are no more people who oppose or question you and refuse to affirm your choices and who you are. It's not even found in affirming yourself regardless of what others think. True freedom is found in finding your identity in who God says that you are:

1 Corinthians 4:3-4 - I care very little if I am judged by you or by any human court; indeed, I do not even judge myself. ⁴ My conscience is clear, but that does not make me innocent. It is the Lord who judges me.

And in Him, I know that I am loved, forgiven, perfect in His sight, that there is no condemnation, that nothing can separate me from His love, that He is always working all things together for good, that He will complete the good work He has begun in me. This frees me up from being controlled by the opinions or judgments of others, and it also frees me up from my own evaluation of myself. I am free because it is the Lord who judges me, and He has declared me perfect in His sight, and is continuing to lovingly discipline me to make me more like Him. I will live to glorify Him, and some will accuse me of doing wrong, but others will see my life and glorify God.

3) Live free to serve God and others

1 Peter 2:16 - Live as free men, but do not use your freedom as a cover-up for evil; live as servants of God.

Our culture would tell us that living free is the opposite of serving others. If you have obligations or commitments to other people, then you aren't free. Your life, your choices, your freedom, is restricted. If you've ever been married, you know that marriage restricts your choices. You can't just do whatever you want, go out whenever you want, or maybe even get the job you want or do the hobbies you want. If you want to get a job, it will restrict your freedom. When you are in love, you restrict yourself. But when do you feel most alive? Is it not when you are in love? Or when you have children? Or when you are doing work that brings you meaning? When you have children, you restrict your freedom and choices. But it brings great joy and life. When you commit to a church family, you restrict your options. But you can find great joy in a community of people devoted to God and to one another. True freedom and life is not found in the absence of restrictions, but in submitting to the right restrictions, the ones that bring life.

This passage gets into restricting freedoms to serve others in work, in marriage, and in relationship to the government. He takes existing household codes about how people were to relate to each other and creatively both upholds and subverts them. We will dive deeper into that next week; today we are staying at a high level. But you can see that freedom as the Bible describes it is very different than freedom as our culture describes it.

Because here is the thing: there is another, more accurate word for our culture's conception of freedom. It is essentially selfishness. Selfishness is living for myself, without restriction, without commitment, without anyone telling me what I can or can not do. Selfishness is the antithesis of love. But it is within commitment that you experience all that makes life beautiful. I commit myself to you, restricting my options for you. You were not created for selfishness, for freedom as the absence of restriction. You were created for the freedom that comes from living as you were designed, as one who knows God and is freed from shame, from guilt, from sin, from fear, from the opinions of others, from the opinions of yourself. You are free to love and be loved.

Martin Luther wrote a treatise On Christian Freedom, in which he began with these words:

A Christian is an utterly free man, lord of all, subject to none.

A Christian is an utterly dutiful man, servant of all, subject to all

1 Corinthians 9:19 - Though I am free and belong to no man, I make myself a slave to everyone, to win as many as possible.

Commit yourself to others. You are not really restricting your freedom, but your selfishness, so that you can become all that God intended for you to be.

We can trust God because He did this for us:

1 Peter 2:21-25 - To this you were called, because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps. ²² "He committed no sin, and no deceit was found in his mouth." ²³ When they hurled their insults at him, he did not retaliate; when he suffered, he made no threats. Instead, he entrusted himself to him who judges justly. ²⁴ He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness; by his wounds you have been

healed. ²⁵ For you were like sheep going astray, but now you have returned to the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls.

He restricted his freedom out of love for us. Now we can trust Him, submit to His design, and do the same for Him and for others.