

### Visible Strangers

***“But you are 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. Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy. 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.”***

There was one important lesson I learned when I moved to Arlington. Everyone is related to everyone, and everyone knows everyone. The Monday or Tuesday after you moved us here, I walked down to Jerry’s to get some coffee and bread. The cashier looked up at me and said, “You must be the new pastor.” It is hard for a stranger to hide in Arlington.

Now imagine if you moved to some foreign country. You don’t speak the language, you know no one. You look different. You dress different. Everyone is staring at you. So you try to blend in or hide a little. I mean, let’s take you to Tehran, for example, or Mecca. I doubt you will dress up in an Uncle Sam outfit on the fourth of July and walk the streets waving an American flag and singing the Star Spangled Banner. You know the people there wouldn’t appreciate it; they may even hurt you for it.

Friends, it is good for us to remember what our text says today. It tells us we are strangers in this world. We may talk the same language, dress the same, share the same culture, but this is not our world because of Christ. And contrary to public opinion, the Lord doesn’t want us to hide or cover up this fact. He wants us to be *visible strangers*. First, we will see how and why we are strangers, and then we will see how we can be visible strangers.

#### *I. Strangers to the world.*

***“But you are 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. Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.”*** The owner of Hewlett Packard would talk of how that company got started in his garage. Look at them today. To understand who we are, it is good to remember where we came from. Once upon a time we were not the people of God. He didn’t know us and we didn’t know him. We didn’t possess citizenship in his kingdom. He wouldn’t listen to our prayers. Once we had not received mercy. Instead, we were cursed by sin, slaves to the devil, and under the punishment of death. At least the orphan sitting in the orphanage has the hope that someone may adopt him, but not the sinful human being.

What changed? Did we somehow cross over the border illegally into God’s Kingdom? No. What happened is a little word, “but.” Did you notice that “but” occurs three times in verses nine and ten? What happened? God happened. He showed us mercy through Jesus Christ. You heard Jesus say in our gospel reading, ***“Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them, but to fulfill them.”*** A child does something wrong. There are two ways he can escape punishment. One is that the parent or teacher simply does not enforce the law. The other way is the parent or teacher forgives him.

Friends, God doesn’t simply look the other way when it comes to our sins. He can’t, and he shouldn’t. Yet, he wants us to be with him. So, he shows us mercy. Jesus came to fulfill the Old Testament. God tells us what is necessary to be a citizen of his kingdom. “You want to be my people, then be holy just like me.” Jesus didn’t abolish or repeal the law. He fulfilled it. He met its every stringent demand. He even paid the price of death for the sins we commit. God has shown us mercy.

***“But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God.”*** God chose you. Why? I could go to the Humane Society and take home a dog. I will have reasons for my choice. Maybe I want a housedog, so I ignore the large Labrador. Maybe I want a non-shedder or I chose a dog because it looked at me with those sad eyes. But God doesn’t choose like that. His choice wasn’t based on your race or color or politics. Look around at the proof. God has chosen men and women, married people and single people, those who never went to college and those who teach in college, white and black and brown, nurses and welders and artists, young and old. The Christian Church is the most diverse organization in the world. And yet none of these factors played a role in God’s choice. God moved God to chose us. It wasn’t even our sad eyes that moved him. He looked into his own heart and was moved to save us.

If we belong to God, then we don’t belong to the world anymore. In the classic children’s novel *Little Lord Fauntleroy*, a young boy living in deep poverty with his mother in America learns that his father was a member of a British noble family. The boy’s grandfather sends for him, and the boy soon finds himself living on a fine estate in England. He is the heir to the estate which includes the title of lord. This is our story as believers. At one moment we were living in poverty, and now we are royalty. Our text calls us a royal priesthood with emphasis on royal. We don’t just serve anyone out there. We are the servants of the King of Kings and Lord of lords. We are a holy nation. The word holy literally means to set something apart. God is holy because he is set apart from sin. As a holy nation we are set apart. There are nations, and then there are believers.

I would not advise that you sing the Star Spangled Banner and wrap yourself up in an American flag in Tehran. But God does advise that we don't hide our status as strangers. He calls us to be visible strangers.

## *II. Visible strangers in the world.*

***“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.”*** One lie Satan throws at us is this: once you become a Christian, the struggle is over. It is like retiring comfortably. Peter says it is the opposite. Becoming a Christian isn't the end of the struggle. It is the beginning. He tells us that war has been declared on us. The sinful nature is attacking. If only it would attack our bodies, but it is attacking our souls. It wants us to stop being the people of God. So Peter tells us to fight back by abstaining from sinful desires.

Notice that Peter isn't telling us to do some super heroic thing here. He tells us to simply live normal, Christian lives. If you read the rest of 1 Peter, you will understand what he is talking about. He calls on us to be quietly submissive to government authority (2:17), to respect bosses, even the bad ones (2:18-25), to honor marriage whether married or single and live our gender in a way that glorifies God (3:1-7), and, in general, to live out our roles in life whether a wife or husband, parent or child, worker or boss. Even simple things like carefully disciplining children or putting up with your spouse's irritating habits and forgiving their sins are all ways of abstaining from sinful desires.

Who can argue against that? But there are many who argue against it. ***“Live such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds.”*** The truth is, pagans, the world, even our own sinful flesh will argue against the good deeds God wants us to perform in this world. They will accuse us of doing wrong. If you recognize two genders, someone will argue with you. If you work hard even for a bad boss, you will be accused of being a scab or brown noser. The attacks are relentless.

We Christians need to understand this. It is like snow. You shovel it out and it only snows again. Every day we are attacked. There is no break. The devil and the world and our flesh make it so hard that we may soon grow tired of it and stop it. But as an encouragement, we have two very good reasons to abstain from sin and do what is good in God's sight. First, it is who we are as God's chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation. Children imitate their parents. God's children imitate God. People can actually see Christ-like love in action.

Second, so God is glorified. It is not so the world may see your good deeds and glorify you. It is so the world may ***“see your good deeds and glorify God.”*** The Christian will stand out more than a six foot five Caucasian American standing at the train depot in Tokyo. Eyebrows will be raised. Questions will be asked. Inquiring minds will want to know. And what can you do? Like any good painting, you direct their attention to the name of the artist in the lower right hand corner. Tell them why we are strangers of the world. And if we are strangers in the world, then we must belong somewhere else, and that is with God in his glorious heaven. Tell them that.

I don't blame a group of people for remembering their culture. Where I grew up they still celebrated Oktoberfest. Mexicans celebrate Cinco de Mayo. Irish, Italians, Swedes, all have their “fests” as they remember their culture. Friends, do the same. Remember who you are, not what you use to be. You are aliens and strangers in this world. Stay strangers. And don't hide it. Be visible strangers. Because Christ has freed you from sin, abstain from it and do that which is good and right in God's eyes. Many will not like it, but the Lord will, and some will notice, too. INJ Amen.