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IF YOU WANT TO PLAY, YOU HAVE TO DRIBBLE

1 Peter 2:11-17

My sophomore year in college I began to feel very strongly that I did not fit in well with the Christians on my campus. I didn’t have much in common with them other than our common faith and while that is huge, I still felt on the outside. I wanted to be somewhere where I felt I belonged and had friends who valued me. I decided I should transfer to a different school because I didn’t and wouldn’t have that at the small college I attended. I applied and was accepted to a another much larger school. I did not end up transferring, but it wasn’t because I couldn’t or because I didn’t want to. The reason I didn’t is a story for another time. Today I want you to think about that unpleasant feeling of not belonging, not fitting in, being an outsider.

I feel that same thing in a different way now. Increasingly I am aware that we who are believers in Jesus do not fit in with our culture. We don’t belong. That can be uncomfortable. Recently Laurie and I watched a couple of shows on TV that made me feel this discomfort in several ways. I will share just one small example. In one of the shows at a couple of points people told the main character that the universe had something for him to do and it was trying to tell him something. This was a key idea in the story. The difficulty I had with this is the universe is not sentient. It is inanimate. I brought an inanimate object today. It is a baseball bat. It can’t talk. It has no plan for my life. Would it be wise to look to this bat expecting it to tell me what to do? That would be stupid. It’s a piece of wood! That’s all. Wait, I object! Not this particular bat, but one of its kind did communicate with me some time ago. It did so in no uncertain terms. It said, “Myatt, you stink at baseball and you should give up trying to play it,”

I didn’t listen for some time, but finally it was yelling at me so loudly I could no longer ignore it. But here’s my problem. In the half century since it spoke to me so clearly, it has gone completely dark. It has not said even one more thing. I have faced many difficult situations and had to make many decisions when I badly needed direction, and the bat has maintained total radio silence the entire time. “Please, Bat. What should I do?” It says nothing and it does nothing. That’s because, as you and I both know, it is an inanimate object, and as such it has no consciousness, no intelligence, no knowledge, no awareness of me or anything else, no plans for anyone and exactly zero ability to communicate anything. And the same is true of the universe. So why would someone say something like that?

It is because people sometimes sense that something or someone seems to have a plan and purpose for them. That something or someone is at work in their lives. To have and carry out plans and purposes requires intelligence and consciousness. It means a someone. Hey, that sounds like God. Well yes, it does, but God is not allowed, you see. We must not talk about God. He can’t be allowed to exist, and he absolutely must not ever be allowed to be at work in our lives. Why this is so is, again, another discussion for another time. But the message is that you are foolish, childish, ignorant to believe God is there and acting in this world. You are just wrong, and frankly the world around us would like you to shut up. In fact, it would prefer that people like you would just disappear from the planet.

That was a small reminder that we aren’t welcome here. Unfortunately, we can’t just transfer to a different location. 1 Peter tells us that Christians have always been on the outside in this world. So somehow, we have to learn how to deal with living in a place where we are the ones who don’t belong. We don’t fit in here, so what are we going to do about it?

PREMISE: WE HAVE TO DEAL WITH BEING FOREIGNERS

From the very beginning of this letter Peter has made the point that followers of Jesus are outsiders in this world. The New Testament tells us that Satan is the god of this age. That means that a believer in Jesus will be out of place here. That theme is important in these verses. Peter addresses his readers as “foreigners and exiles.” The fact that they were outsiders in their world had some significant implications for how they would live. Likewise it has implications for us today.

Being different, being an outsider, will always cause a person to be at best excluded to some extent, and at worst, to be viewed with suspicion, even mistreated and rejected. That has always been true in the human race, and it remains as true today as it ever has.

Peter was concerned about how his readers lived among the pagans, or literally, “among the Gentiles.” In verse 12 he said people were accusing them of doing wrong. Does that sound familiar? In verse15 he said, “It is God’s will that by doing good you should silence the ignorant talk of foolish people.” There was talk about the Christians. They were being criticized by others. The Roman historian, Suetonius, said that Christians were “a class of people animated by a novel and dangerous superstition.” His contemporary, Tacitus, said Christianity was one of the most “hideous and shameful things” to be found in Rome. He said Christians were hated “because of their vices.” Christians were dangerous, shameful and hideous. Christians were definitely subjected to criticism.

It’s not hard to understand why that happened. Consider a first century follower of Jesus who had grown up in a pagan culture. That person had always participated in pagan religions and practices with family and friends. That formed the core of their community life. Now this new believer in Jesus stops participating with them. Not only that, but eventually the friends and family members begin to understand that this Christian regards many of their practices as immoral and wrong. This believer in Jesus also claimed there is only one God and that the gods they worshiped were false, and that their worship of them was going to subject them to condemnation by the one true God. Instead of joining them in their usual events, this Christian went off and met with a small group of other Christians. Who knew what they did there? People were offended. They began talking about the Christian. Rumors about them circulated. There were rumors of love feasts and of them eating flesh and drinking blood at their fellowship events. It’s not too hard to see why the early Christians were viewed suspiciously and were ostracized.

We have some issues that are analogous to that. As believers in Jesus we maintain that there is only one true God, and that is Jesus. We believe that to worship any other is to doom oneself to condemnation and judgment. It is also to guarantee that one’s life now will end up futile, frustrating and empty. We believe that there is absolute right and wrong in a world that says all is relative. We believe that our world and all who are in it are the products not of random, accidental forces, but of an intentional Creator. We believe that there are some sexual practices that God calls wrong and they end up ruining lives.

Our beliefs are directly contrary to our culture. Our culture despises them. It does not want them to even exist. To believe as we do is to be seen as ignorant, foolish, narrow, bigoted and hateful. It is to have beliefs that our culture deems archaic. This has been an issue for many decades, but in the last 20 years or so it has become massively more pronounced. It is highly likely that it is on its way to becoming a tidal wave in our culture, and standing in the face of that wave means Christians are going to be deluged.

How we are to respond? What should we do? Our natural response is to defend ourselves and to fight back. It is to try to get power and force our culture to change. Christians over the past 40 years often emphasized power, especially political power. The body of Christ always loses when it does that. That effort will be as effective as trying to stop a tsunami. It will fail. Second, we need to realize that God tells us to take a totally different approach. These verses show us the way God wants us to stand in a culture that regards us as superstitious and dangerous. It is crucial we grasp what Peter is telling us here and live by these truths. In these verses there are two commands that specifically tell us how to live in this alien environment. One is in verse 12 and one is in verse 16.

LIVE GOOD LIVES

Reclaim your culture for the Lord! Stand up and make a difference, exercise your right and take the power back! Redeem the culture! I’ve heard these kinds of things from Christians for many years. You can understand why someone might think this is what we need to do in a culture that is in a mad dash toward oblivion. But Peter didn’t tell his readers to try to change the culture. He didn’t write about exercising power. He commanded them to take a radically different approach. He said they should live such good lives that even those who opposed them would have to glorify God on that day when Jesus returns. So the way we respond is live good lives. What kind of good lives?

You can see what seems to be a negative approach to a good life in his statement that we should abstain from sinful desires. Yes, that’s right, the world has given itself to a mad rush to fulfill those desires of lust and sex and drunkenness and orgies. We shouldn’t have anything to do with that. Well, that is true, but that is not what Peter meant. He said there were desires that wage war against our own souls. These desires are self destructive. But what desires did he mean?

They could be almost any desire. Yes, some desires are inherently destructive. They are the kinds of things specifically prohibited in Scripture. But often it isn’t the desire itself that makes it destructive. It is the place it has in our hearts and lives that makes it sinful. Any desire that is more important to us than doing God’s will and honoring him becomes a sinful desire. Is it sinful to want to get money? No, in our society you need money to live. You need it to get food, clothing and shelter, among other things. The desire for money becomes sinful and destructive when it becomes more important to us than doing God’s will and honoring him. It becomes sinful when it takes a place in our hearts above God himself.

Picture a teenager in high school. This young person desires friends. Is that sinful? Of course not. God has built into us the desire to connect with other people. But when that desire becomes more important than doing God’s will and honoring him, it becomes sinful. It is putting something above God. Every time we do that, we are doing harm to ourselves.

Galatians 5:16 says, “Walk by the Spirit and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh.” The desires of the flesh are those sinful desires Peter mentioned. In Galatians 5:19 Paul described what comes out of those desires, calling them the “acts of the flesh.” He said they are obvious. “Sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery.” Yeah, see it’s all about sex. No, it’s not. You have to read on. In verse 20 he added “Idolatry and witchcraft, hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions and envy.” Discord, dissension, anger, selfish ambition, envy, all come out of those selfish desires and create all the conflict we see in the world.

Years ago two good friends of mine who were both solid followers of Jesus and examples of godly men, after dreaming together and much discussion, began a new business partnership. Unfortunately, after a few years it became apparent that the business was failing. Both of them had considerable money at stake. They both desired not to lose a lot of money. There was nothing wrong with that. But that legitimate desire became sinful when it got to be more important to them than doing God’s will. The wrangling began. Tempers began to grow hot. They began trying to draw others into their fray. Then they hired lawyers and the suing began. There was hatred, anger, discord and dissension, and somehow no matter how much others told them this was not God’s will, they wouldn’t stop. They destroyed their relationship and hurt others in the process. That’s why Peter says we must avoid those sinful desires.

But that’s not the main thrust of this passage. The passage is much more focused on the positive. Peter says the way we respond to our hostile culture is to live good lives, to do so much good that it cannot be denied. He says we should submit to authorities for the Lord’s sake. We do it to honor him. But what should we do when those authorities are anti-Christian? Well, what were the authorities Peter was referring to like? Were they godly? No, they opposed Christianity. They were morally corrupt. But Peter said we should just submit to them.

He said in verse 17 that we should show proper respect to everyone. We are to recognize that every human being was created in the image of God. That image may not seem recognizable, but they are God’s creation. Jesus died on the cross for them. So we are to stand for the dignity of every human being. We are to treat them with respect. What if they are depraved, degraded, horrible people? They are still people for whom Jesus Christ died, people of enormous worth.

There’s a man in our neighborhood who is a bit difficult to take. He is something of a know it all and has tended to stick his nose in other people’s business. He’s been something of a trouble maker. There were two young families that we loved who once lived in our neighborhood but have since moved away. I was disappointed when they left and was surprised because both had told me how much they loved our neighborhood. I learned later that both of them moved because they lived near that one guy and he had been so difficult that they preferred to sell their homes and buy elsewhere rather than keep living near him. God calls on me to show that guy proper respect, even though it can be hard.

Peter tells us the way to respond to our alien, hostile culture is not to fight it, not to gain power and seek to control it, but to live such good and godly lives that people ultimately cannot argue with them. It means treating everyone with respect and kindness. It means living full of God’s grace, his compassion and love, and spreading his goodness everywhere we go to everyone we encounter.

There is a couple in the state of Washington named Ralph and Cheryl Broetje who owned apple and cherry orchards. They have recently sold most of their business but at one point they owned 6000 acres of orchards. Many people who work in the orchards up there are seasonal employees who are paid low wages. They often live in their cars, or in tents or ragged shelters out in the fields. The Broetjes are followers of Jesus, and that affects how they operate. They seek to lead good lives. Ralph said, “Are the least privileged of society better off or further deprived by the way we treat them? Are we helping people grow and feel more respected and loved, and have more self confidence, or do we put them down and make them feel less?” Driven by their faith they committed to hire more employees year around and to pay them higher wages. They opened a packing plant to provide good paying jobs for people. They spent more than $5 million to build a housing complex called Vista Hermosa consisting of homes and apartments for their employees to live in, a day care center, a school, a gym, a soccer field, a gas station, a convenience store and a post office. One rival grower called Broetje an “evangelical fanatic.” Broetje admits what he has done doesn’t make financial sense, but he’s focused on other goals. They gave away between 65 and 70% of their profits. They are living a beautiful life. They are doing the kind of thing Peter says we should do in this alien world of ours.

LIVE AS FREE PEOPLE

Verse 16 says a second way to respond to our culture is to live as free people. This is interesting given the historical context. Verse 18 specifically addresses slaves. Many of the believers Peter wrote to, maybe most, were slaves. It seems insensitive at best to tell them to live as free people. Slavery in the first century was not as horrific as the slavery that existed in this country, but if you were a slave you were not free. You did not have control over your own life. So how could Peter tell them to live as free people when so many of them weren’t free? Wasn’t that a slap in the face?

Peter obviously knew they weren’t all physically free. So the freedom he referred to had to mean something other than that. He was talking about a freedom that could exist regardless of one’s circumstances. He wanted them to live as free people even if they were slaves. That means that this freedom had to be internal, something that can be exercised in any situation.

Being free is big in our society. But the freedom our culture seeks is autonomy. The word “autonomy” is derived from two Greek words. The word *autos* meant “self.” The second word, *nomos*, meant “law.” So autonomy means self law. It means having no law ruling one’s life except one’s own law. It means wanting no one telling me what to do, submitting to no one and nothing, and having freedom to do whatever I want, whenever I want, however I want. That is our culture’s ideal of freedom.

However, listen to the words of the great historians, Will and Ariel Durant, in their history of western civilization. They wrote, “the first condition of freedom is its limitation. Make it absolute and it dies in chaos.” If everyone seeks autonomy, unlimited freedom, the result will be disastrous. Let’s imagine a scenario that will help us grasp this. Envision El Camino Real between Encinitas and Carlsbad at a time when it isn’t doing an imitation of a parking lot. What is going to happen if the drivers operate autonomously, meaning the only law they obey is whatever they feel like doing. The speed limit is 55 there, but that doesn’t matter because a speed limit is a law, one they assert freedom from. Traffic signals are also laws, so those will be disregarded as well. The same is true for lanes on the road. What you end up with is people driving at high speed wherever they feel like on the road, with no regard for traffic lights. What is going to happen? It will be apocalyptic. There would be one horrific accident after another, with people being seriously injured and even killed. That’s autonomy. That is pretty much what autonomy would produce in every aspect of life.

This is what Peter meant when he said in verse 16, “do not use your freedom as a cover up for evil.” When we say, “I am free, so I don’t have to do what anyone tells me to do,” we are seeking autonomy. When we do that, we are immediately causing evil to occur.

To live as free people, we cannot seek autonomy. Freedom absolutely requires limits to be enjoyed. What kind of limits are we to observe? Peter says we are to live as God’s slaves. This is one of those paradoxes that we encounter in the Scriptures. Jesus said to really live we have to die to self. To become great we must become servants. Here is another one of those. To be free, we must become slaves to God. True freedom is found not in autonomy, but in living every moment as a slave to God. That gives us a freedom that we can experience even if a slave or a prisoner. But how can limiting ourselves bring freedom?

I’ll give you two examples that I hope will illustrate it. The first one is a sports example. I’ll use a game that isn’t my favorite, but is very popular right now. Let’s think about basketball. What will happen if a basketball wannabe decides that the rules of the game limit his freedom and enjoyment. He wants to play freely without those restrictions. For instance, there’s that ridiculous rule that if you have the ball, you can’t move around the court without dribbling the basketball. That is so limiting. It really slows me down, and it’s awkward. So our wannabe decides he’s going to take the ball and run up and down the court without dribbling. That’s going to be a problem, isn’t it? When the other team has the ball our wannabe baller thinks the rules about what he can do to stop them are dumb. The rule is you can’t hardly touch them. Hey, have you ever seen a football game? Here’s how you can stop the opposing team. Just knock them flat like they do in football. Yes, our wannabe is free, but he’s not going to enjoy the freedom because he isn’t going to get to play the game. He’ll never know the joy that comes from actually playing the game within the rules. The only way he can ever enjoy freedom as a basketball player is by limiting himself, subjecting himself to the rules. If you want to play the game you have to dribble.

Here’s another example that is even closer to the reality that Peter describes. I can recall a moment when I was young and single that I thought, what if you married someone and then a person came along that you like better? This, of course, is the problem of the commitment-phobic young people of today. Marriage is hugely limiting, and many of the entertainment people in our culture deride it for just that reason. Actress Scarlett Johannsen recently said that monogamy is just not natural. But there came a moment in my life when I was so overwhelmed by a young woman named Laurie that the thought of living without her was painful. She totally obliterated any question I had about being married to one person because going through life with her was the most desirable thing I could imagine. To my surprise, wonderment and joy, she agreed to marry me, as crazy as it seemed. That marriage is truly limiting. We have chosen to say no to all other people and be faithful to each other. Marriage is limiting in other ways as well. I don’t just decide to go on a trip somewhere without consulting with Laurie. I don’t just choose to watch a sports event on TV without regard to what she would like to do. In so many ways marriage limits freedom. But it has been the most freeing, joyful thing in my life. I have experienced delicious freedom in my relationship with Laurie that I would never have had without her. In fact, I marvel at it every day of my life. Being married to her feels like what I was made and intended to do, and now I am free to do it.

Years ago Laurie and I saw an ad from Aloha Airlines, an airline that has since disappeared. They were an interisland airline in Hawaii, but they were trying to break into the larger Trans Pacific market. They tried to do so by offering outrageously low fares. The ad was for a special very limited time deal on airfare to Hawaii that was unbelievably low. We didn’t have a lot of money, but we couldn’t pass it up. I went online and booked a great fare. I was so happy. Until I looked at the confirmation the next day and realized what I had done. I had booked a round trip from Hawaii to San Diego, which would have been fine, except we don’t live in Hawaii. We needed the trip to go the other way. The tickets were non-refundable. I know you’re probably thinking, “I’d say Myatt is as dumb as a rock, but that would be insulting to rocks. I can’t believe they let him walk around by himself in the world.” I told Laurie what I had done. She wasn’t upset with me, though I certainly gave her reason to be. She didn’t ridicule me. She didn’t express the frustration I so richly deserved. She just said, “Well, what do you want to do about it?” I called the airline and explained the problem, begging for mercy. They did change the tickets, at a price. It ended up costing about what it would have cost without the deal. Laurie never said to anyone, “Let me tell you what my idiot husband did.” She never mentioned it again. The point is, I get to live with this awesome woman, with whom life is full of laughter and fun, without fear of rejection, or ridicule, or contempt. I am free to be myself, to be who I am with all these quirks and shortcomings, and know that I will be loved and accepted for who I am despite all of it. I am more free to be my true self with Laurie than anywhere else in the world. That is tremendous freedom. I do not recall a single moment in the past 42 years of marriage when I have felt limited. I have felt joyful, blessed, loved, freed up of so many things and incredibly fortunate. Never limited.

Does being a slave to God limit our freedom? Yes, it certainly does. But in being a slave to God we experience a freedom like what I have with Laurie but even better, a freedom that nothing can limit, a freedom we can enjoy in every circumstance of our lives. It is a freedom that we discover we were created to enjoy.

This is a radical and seemingly paradoxical proposition. But it is true. If you want to be free, live as a slave to God. See your goal, your priority, your reason for existing, to be to do whatever God wants you to do every moment of every day. If you do that you will live in such a way that it will confound the world around you. This is the best answer you can have to a hostile, alien culture. They cannot stop you from living freely, and being joyful and strong in that freedom. The world is desperate for peace, hope, love, and dying for grace. As a slave of God you will have all of it, and they will see it.

CONCLUSION

When I was young Disneyland offered so many rides that seemed exciting to me as a kid, but now seem dull compared to some of the newer rides. There was the Matterhorn of course, and the Rainbow Mountain Mine Train. As an adult I came to think the Matterhorn was too tame and the Mine Train disappeared in favor of a much better ride called Thunder Mountain. A couple of other rides that seemed thrilling to a kid were the autopia, where I thought I actually got to drive a car like a grown up. Then there was the motor boat cruise. Before going on it I pictured myself driving a speed boat through the waters at breakneck speed. I discovered that it wasn’t exciting at all. It didn’t make much difference what I did with the steering wheel or the throttle. The boat was on a track and was going where that track took it no matter what I did with the wheel, and hitting the throttle maybe made the engine sound louder but the boat didn’t go any faster.

Compare that boat with the time we rode wave runners in the ocean. What a thrill it was to carve our way through the waves at high speed. It was way more fun. Too often people think of being a slave to God as being like the motor boat cruise at Disneyland when what we want are high speed jet skis. The surprising news of this passage is that what seems to be the tame, boring way, of being a slave to God, is actually the adventure and the freedom that we long for. It means being free from fear, free from condemnation by God, free from the deadly tyranny of trying to measure up, free from guilt, free from the prison of what other people think, free from an empty life, free from the pursuit of things that can never bring the fulfillment we seek so desperately. It means freedom from trying to earn God’s acceptance or prove something about myself and how impressive I am. It means having peace, hope, purpose, love, all the things we most need. It means living full throttle, blasting full speed ahead in life with reckless abandon, because God is with me, and he is sovereign over every moment of my life. It is also the perfect response to a hostile world, because the world wants that freedom desperately. It turns out autonomy, the world’s idea of freedom, is the motor boat cruise because it only takes you one place, to lack of peace, lack of meaning and fulfillment, to anger and discord, lack of love, loss of joy, and finally condemnation and hopelessness. You’re on a track, and no matter how you turn the wheel, that’s where you’re going. Who would want that? It is so much better to be truly free, to live securely in God’s love and forgiveness as his slave.

Don’t fret about what the world is doing. Don’t try to make Satan’s system somehow be not so bad. Live a good life, and be a slave to God so you can in real freedom.