



Westminster  
Presbyterian Church  
NACOGDOCHES, TEXAS

## Living on the Edge 1 Peter 1:17-23

To the average Roman citizen during the first century, Christians seemed to be a rather strange sort. And picking up on this fact, Peter exhorted the early believers to live as strangers in the world.

Hear the word as I read 1 Peter 1:17-23:

**“Since you call on a Father who judges each man's work impartially, live your lives as strangers here in reverent fear. For you know that it was not with perishable things such as silver or gold that you were redeemed from the empty way of life handed down to you from your forefathers, but (you were redeemed) with the precious blood of Christ.”**

Maybe what Peter is saying here is that we are strangers in the world because we are redeemed from the empty way of life presented by the world. We are redeemed from a life focused on materialism, a life focused on self and our needs. We are redeemed from a way of life that will leave us empty. We are redeemed from sin and the ways of futility in order to live with and for Jesus Christ.

Peter continued writing, **“We were redeemed with the precious blood of Christ Jesus, a lamb without blemish or defect. He was chosen before the creation of the world, but was revealed in these last times for your sake. Through him you believe in God, who raised him from the dead and glorified him, and so your faith and hope are in God.**

**“Now that you have purified yourselves by obeying the truth so that you have sincere love for your brothers, love one another deeply, from the heart. For you have been born again, not of perishable seed, but of imperishable, through the living and enduring word of God.”**

I read an article about the importance of a good sermon title, for a good title will peak the interest of the listeners and get the sermon off to a running start. I read a few sermon titles this week, and I loved the one preached about Jesus healing the demoniac in the region of Gerasenes. It was titled, “The Rude, Crude Dude in the Nude.” Now that will get your attention. That preacher was off to a running start.

Then there was the sermon on adultery titled, “You Can’t Have Your Kate and Edith Too.” Now where do these preachers come up with this stuff? They make me feel so unoriginal.

Some titles are placed on church marquees in an attempt to increase church attendance. A few years back a preacher in Tyler placed his sermon title on the church marquee, "Overcoming the F\$&! Word." Now that will get the attention of the community; however, the visitors who came especially to hear that sermon may have been a little disappointed that the "F" word the pastor had on his mind was "fear." You have to be careful not to mis-communicate your topic with a sermon title.

So what am I talking about with this title, "Living on the Edge?" Actually, not being all that creative, I stole this title, and some of the ideas for this sermon from Fred Craddock. But I still have to be careful with the title "Living on the Edge," because I am not talking about high energy thrills. I have two kids who enjoy jumping out of perfectly good airplanes. One of them told me that he has taken off some 65 times in C-130s and never landed in one. This sermon, *Living on the Edge*, is not about cliff climbing, deep cave spelunking, or jumping out of airplanes.

I am not talking about some of the crazy, and sometimes mean, things we do to break the boredom: to put glue in the teacher's chair or hide a banana on the top shelf in the Genetics lab so the fruit flies fill the room.

For the purpose of this sermon, living on the edge has nothing to do with morally questionable behavior. Some people live on the edge of questionable behavior and some tend to fall off. A man explains to his wife later, "We didn't mean for it to happen. We were just friends and worked together at the office, and then later on I asked her if she'd like to have lunch. We all have to eat, you know, and then this and that happened. It just happened." Some people play on the edge of an illicit affair, then it goes over the edge and they say, "Well, these things just happen." I'm not talking about this kind of living on the edge.

What Peter meant by living on the edge is living as reverent strangers or aliens in this world. Peter is talking about being a people who are on the edge – strangers, outsiders, aliens who are out there, yet are called to permeate society. Peter says, live out your time here on Earth as foreigners in reverent fear. Peter encouraged the church of his day, either living or about to live under horrible persecution, to live as aliens. You are a foreigner, a resident alien, so fear God and live to his glory, and to live for God's glory will cause one to live on the edge. Living on the edge is like living as an immigrant in a foreign world.

We are all aware and have our opinions about immigration issues, and so we have a firsthand understanding of what Peter is talking about. Yet to understand this text we have to get into the shoes of those aliens who come to our country. We live here on Earth, we work here, we raise our families here, but this is not our residence. It is like the children born in a missionary family. They may have never lived in the United States, nor seen this great land. They were born in a foreign land, but because their parents are American citizens, the children are as well. This is part of what I am trying to communicate by living on the edge – living in a foreign land as an alien.

Peter is saying to those who are being baptized, "You are resident aliens, exiles, strangers." Over the years the church has come up with some interesting ways of

interpreting what it means to live as strangers, exiles or aliens in a foreign land. Some have taken this to mean that when a person is baptized they join a tightly knit group of likeminded Christians who are to have nothing to do with their former life. Remember the Branch Davidians in Waco or the people so long ago who lived in the commune in Jonestown? Nine hundred or so like-minded people bonded together, pulled away from their families, never to be heard from again. No, we are not to find our little cluster of like-minded people and separate ourselves. We are to live as aliens in this world.

There are some very sincere Christians who feel Peter is telling them to separate themselves from society. That is what they understand to be resident aliens. Some of the most beautiful Christian people in this country live out their faith this way. Take, for example, the Amish. They are just different. They dress differently. They drive those buggies and do not have automobiles. The liberals, who actually drive cars, paint the chrome black so that it will be different. They marry their own, and as best they can, they separate themselves from society. But how many people would give a fortune to own a farm that is as lovely as theirs?

There are some who act like strangers in a foreign land who are not as extreme as the Amish, but they still separate themselves in their own way. They don't vote. They don't feel any responsibility for the environment. They don't get involved in politics. They say, "Just as long as I'm saved, what difference does anything else make? If the environment is polluted, they say, "Well, this world is not my home. I'm just passing through." One kind preacher reminds them, "Who do you know that would mess up the home of someone else? If you're going to live here, then at least keep the place livable for those who call this world their home."

But we often hear, "Well, as long as I am saved, the world is not my responsibility. I'm just passing through." Do you know anybody like that?

There may be something admirable about these Christians, but I think, or at least in my humble opinion, this is not the kind of Christianity Peter had in mind.

In Peter's day, when Christians were baptized they were often given both milk and honey. The milk and honey symbolized the Promised Land. These new believers have now become citizens of the Promised Land or the Kingdom of God. They have a new home, but they were never told to separate themselves. Rather, they were told to go back into world where they were living. The text says, "**Live out your time as foreigners here in reverent fear.**" It does not say separate yourselves, but live here.

Jesus turned the disciples into a strange lot, but he never told them to separate themselves from the world. He sent them into the world to proclaim that the Kingdom of God is here and now.

The Kingdom of God is found in those places where God is being honored and his will carried out. It is not simple hope in the face of death, but when a third world family learns to properly feed itself through the agricultural ministry of the church, the Kingdom of God is known in the world.

When a troubled youth is taken under the wing of a mentor who challenges him or her to diligently seek an education, the Kingdom of God is breaking through.

When a homeless person or a family whose water has been cut off can find a safe place to take a bath and wash clothes, the Kingdom of God is found.

Christians are to go back into the world, back to their friends, and be a part of their lives. They are to go back and serve God through their God given vocations. But now when they go back into their world they are to imitate the character of God revealed in Jesus Christ, as we do when we live as aliens in the world. In our vocation, in our home, in our civic life, we are to imitate the character of Jesus Christ.

In imitating Jesus Christ we are called to love without partiality. We are not to make distinctions. We are to exhibit the character of God whose love and grace and friendship are freely given to all. That is the way baptized Christians are to live as strangers in the world.

In Peter's world it was dangerous to live on the edge. In the fourth chapter he wrote: **"<sup>12</sup>Dear friends, do not be surprised at the painful trial you are suffering, as though something strange were happening to you. <sup>13</sup>But rejoice that you participate in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed."**

The danger for the Christian living on the edge is that they will suffer, and it is dangerous for the church when it encourages its members to go back into the world. We are sent into the world, but the problem with that is the world is full of temptation. I mean, what is to prevent baptized folks when they go back into the world from getting absorbed again in the world and then re-developing the same prejudices and values of their surroundings six months later, so you cannot tell any difference?

I guess we could separate ourselves. We could form a commune and we would sing hymns, study the Bible, grow our food, and build our houses apart from the world. We could, to the best of our ability, minimize temptation as we stay together, but we would be of no use to the very world we are called to enter with the power of the Gospel. We have to go into the world, and in the world there is always pressure to conform, always temptation – so be alert and careful.

We all know how powerful the pressure is to conform to society's standards. I mean, look at our houses and cars. We want to be like everyone else -- to win the approval of our friends and family, so what is to prevent us from slipping back into the patterns of our culture? I think some call it backsliding.

Consider the pressure of a new Christian who returns to his family. Then the very next Sunday, a pretty day, the father gets up and says, "Hey, you know what? Why don't we fix a picnic basket and go to the lake? We can take along our fishing equipment and the boat, catch a few bass. We'll fire up the grill and cook and if we don't catch anything we can take along some hamburgers and hotdogs. Maybe get in some swimming and skiing. What about that?" Is this new Christian going to say, "But dad, it's Sunday! I'm supposed to be in church." That's a lot of pressure on a new Christian. Certainly the older and more mature

Christians know the importance of worship; they know the things of this world should not interfere with worship. But for the new Christian, what pressure! How is it going to sound when he says, “Well, I can’t go because I am supposed to be in church”?

“Well, you can go next Sunday. After all there are a lot of Sundays in the year. What does it matter if you miss one or two? God doesn’t care.”

What is to prevent the person to whom Peter is preaching to keep from going back to the old way of life? Well, we have some tools. For one, we have Scripture. If you want help in being faithful, read the Scriptures. Read them every day. Start with Luke or John and read until you can’t read anymore. Or, read one paragraph and spend some quiet moments reflecting on how it applies to your situation. Now don’t be frivolous. Don’t just flip open the Bible to the first verse you see. You may have heard of the person who, looking for inspiration or God’s leading, closed his eyes, opened the Bible and pointed with his finger to the verse he would meditate upon for the remainder of the day. That is one way of choosing a text, but what happens when the finger falls upon Judges chapter one? **“They found Lord-Bezek and fought against him, putting to rout the Canaanites and Perizzites. Lord-Bezek fled, but they chased him and caught him, and cut off his thumbs and big toes.”**

I’m not sure what kind of day one will have if they meditate on that text all day. Don’t be frivolous, but read your Bible looking for God to speak to you.

We have the gift of prayer. If you are going to be in the world and live as a resident alien, spend some time each day in prayer for yourself, your family and friends, and for the world.

Then there is regular worship. I remember the movie *The Right Stuff*, and there is that scene when a reporter asked the seven Mercury astronauts if they attended church regularly. Alan Shepherd answered with a big smile, “Yes, I attend regularly.” You know, I don’t mean by regular once a year. I mean unless you are sick, or in a place where there is no church or you have to work or be fired, attend worship. Don’t do it for God’s sake, but for your sake and your family’s sake. The strongest moral force in society is worship. I do not believe a person can truly worship and do some of the things that are happening in society today. If you are going to survive in the world then don’t neglect worship.

Then there is giving. I may be wrong, but I understand this is the most powerful way of enjoying Christ in the world, and a powerful way to live like a stranger in the world without being reabsorbed back into the world. Do something for somebody in the name of Jesus.

We are called to live in the world. And you are wise enough to know you cannot live with God’s character in the world without some spiritual nourishment. I know where you can find it. So go into the world, live in the world, love the world as God loves the world, but remember the gifts God has given to keep his character alive in you: Scripture, worship, prayer, the Holy Spirit, and giving of yourself. There is no other way to find the staying power to live on the edge without falling off. Amen.