

Being a Different People: A different purpose

I want to talk this morning about the importance of being a different people and how Scriptures call us to be different. In general people don't like to be different. We all like to fit in with others. We try to find a way to be what people want us to be. Like the young man who discovered a very attractive lady had the seat next to him on his flight. After visiting her for a while he finally asked her. "What kind of men do you like." She said, "Well I've always been partial to Native American Indians. They are so strong and noble. But then Jewish men impress me, they're often successful and put their women on a pedestal. Then of course there's always the men from the south, they're such gentlemen. So, tell me, what's your name." Quickly the man answered, "Well my name is White Cloud Goldstein. But all my friends call my Bubba." All of us like to be liked.

Christians in the first century, like people in any time or place, wanted to be liked, to fit into their society. In most ways their lives were not unlike their neighbors. They had many of the same dreams and goals for their lives. They hoped for a successful business, paid their taxes, live at peace with others, have good families, raise their children well and generally stay out of trouble.

But to become a Christian in those days did create problems. You would immediately become a minority in the surrounding pagan world. Sometimes that would mean people would reject you, even persecute you. Some situations were

particularly difficult. Christian citizens often found it troublesome trying to submit and be respectful to a pagan government. Christian wives found it troublesome trying to submit and be respectful to pagan husbands. You can imagine the difficulties Christian slaves had with their pagan masters, sometimes commanded to do things that their Christian faith told them was immoral.

Christians were seen by others as intolerant because they didn't worship the gods of the city. Most citizens made sure every god got some attention, but Christians insisted on worshipping only one God, Yahweh. So, when floods, diseases, earthquakes or whatever disasters fell on the people, Christians were a convenient scapegoat to blame. "The gods are mad at us because the Christians refuse to worship them." And not just the gods, business men often got angry with Christians because they were often not good for business, that is if your business was selling idols, or perhaps running brothels.

So, a few years after the Church got its start, Christians in different parts of the empire began to have problems and not a few troubling questions. "Does persecution mean God has rejected us or abandoned us, or is unable to protect us?" "Is worshipping God really worth all this trouble?" "How should we respond to this; how do we live in this kind of world?" So, Peter writes letters to Christians throughout the empire to address these questions. Basically he had two answers to all the questions that these new Christians were wrestling with.

First he told them, you must understand you are different. He used the word stranger. You are strangers in your own land! That's how he addresses them at the beginning of his letter. "To God's elect, strangers in the world scattered throughout Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia and Bithynia." Peter is telling them, "When you became a Christian you received a different identity, you became citizens of a different homeland." He doesn't say these Christians ceased to be residents of Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia and Bithynia. But he does suggest that their status has profoundly changed. They are now, in a sense, resident aliens, here on temporary visas. Their true homeland is no longer here.

There is a story of a Christian minister from American who traveled to Poland to visit a famous Polish rabbi, Hofetz Chaim. When the minister arrived at the rabbi's apartment he was surprised to find him living in such austerity. The furniture in his apartment consisted of a single table and chair. "Rabbi, where is your furniture?" The Rabbi answered, "Where is yours?" The minister answered, "Mine! But rabbi, I am only a visitor here." The rabbi answered, "So am I."

So, first Peter divests Christians of their ordinary identity, making them strangers, then he gives them their new identity in this world. To describe this new identity Peter uses several words, chosen, holy, priests. The King James uses the phrase, "a peculiar people." Look up that word in the dictionary and you find definitions like "odd, curious, bizarre, unusual, weird, abnormal." Well, some of

us Christians may actually fit those descriptions, but that's not what the word means in Scripture. It means “to belong exclusively.” That’s actually what the word “holy” means, something that has been set apart for a special purpose. So the NIV changes the word “peculiar” to a “special people belonging to God.” That’s our new identity, to be a chosen people. Listen as Peter expounds on what this means. “As you come to him, the living Stone – rejected by men but chosen by God and precious to him – you also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ” (2:4-5).

As Christians we are a chosen people; we’ve been given a different purpose for our life. We are the living stones of a spiritual temple. More than that, we are actually the priests in that temple. And as priests our main purpose is to offer sacrifices to God. Now if one has been chosen by God, one might think such a status would come with a lot of perks. And of course it does. But those perks do not include immunity from the rejection and ridicule of others. Peter continues.

“For in Scripture it says, “See, I lay a stone in Zion, a chosen and precious cornerstone, and the one who trusts in him will never be put to shame. Now to you who believe, this stone is precious. But to those who do not believe, “The stone the builders rejected has become the capstone,” and “a stone that causes men to

stumble and a rock that makes them fall.” They stumbled because they disobey the message – which is also what they were destined for.”

Peter quotes from the prophet Isaiah and the Psalms. In Isaiah chapters 8 and 28 the prophet speaks to Israel who was in a similar situation as the believers in Peter’s day. Rather than the Romans, it was the Assyrians who were the mighty pagan kingdom and Israel was afraid of them. They sought to enter into an alliance with them for protection. But Isaiah warns them that they must put their trust in God as their cornerstone, the foundation of their house, not in political treaties. Unfortunately, for many in Israel, God was not to them a precious cornerstone; instead he was a stone that caused them to stumble and fall. The Israelites were afraid that if they trusted in God alone, the Assyrians would defeat them. So rather than resist the Assyrians, reject their ways, rather than be different, they compromised their faith, their integrity and slowly became like the Assyrians.

In between these two Isaiah passages, Peter inserts a verse from Psalm 118. This psalm describes a situation King David faced. David was chosen by God to be King, but he was rejected by Israel’s king Saul. This psalm celebrates the fact that in spite of King Saul and Israel’s rejection, David was victorious. The stone that Israel (the builders) rejected became the cornerstone for God’s house. Jesus applied this very psalm to himself in Mark 12:10 in his parable of the workers who

killed the owner's servants and finally his son. So, Peter says to be chosen by God does not mean you will not be rejected by men. In fact, even God's people rejected God's chosen, first David, then Isaiah and finally God's very own son.

But why have we been chosen? What is the purpose for which we were chosen? Peter answers that in vs 9. "You are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light." In my opinion, this is one of the most important truths in scripture. Scripture tells us that God chose Abraham to be the father of a nation; the nation of Israel was to be God's chosen people. But neither Abraham nor Israel were chosen to be an exclusive people, but to be an instrumental people; they were chosen for a specific purpose. God tells Abraham in Genesis 12, "I will make you into a great nation...and all peoples on earth will be blessed by you." God tells Israel through Isaiah in 49:6, "I will make you a light for the Gentiles, that you may bring my salvation to the ends of the earth."

God chose some to make known to all that all have been chosen by God. This is Paul's meaning in Ephesians 1:3-4. "Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ. For he chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight. In love he predestined us to be adopted as his sons through Jesus Christ, in accordance with his pleasure and will – to the praise of his

glorious grace.” We were all chosen in Christ even before the world began. Long before there was an Eden, God had already determined there would have to be a Golgotha. Abraham and Israel were chosen in order that the whole world would know that in Christ all have been chosen by God’s marvelous and wonderful grace.

Not knowing that revelation, not living in that light, means that men will live in darkness. They will not believe they have been divinely chosen; instead they will believe things like they were accidentally created. Not believing they are divinely chosen, they will have no divine, eternal purpose for their lives and will live instead with endless, purposeless distractions.

But God doesn’t want men to be in darkness, so he commissions us to be royal priests, a holy nation, a people belonging to God. The image of a royal priesthood comes from Exodus 19:5. “If you obey me fully and keep my covenant then out of all nations you will be my treasured possession. Although the whole earth is mine, you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.” And Peter goes on to explain what the purpose of this kingdom of priests is to do, “*that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light.*” So Peter is saying to this new, infant church, “You are a separate kingdom; you are a kingdom within a kingdom, a kingdom beyond all kingdoms. It is kind of like living as a diplomat. No matter what country you may happen to

live in, you are subject primarily to the laws and government of your home country. For Christians that home country is Heaven.

That is why throughout history there has always been debate among Christians about whether or not to express their allegiance to a nation on earth. That is why for some Christians it has seemed inappropriate, even irreverent to display national flags or sing patriotic songs in a service that is devoted to worship of God. That is why some Christians even choose not to or at least feel a little uneasy pledging allegiance to any flag. Any allegiance to be pledged should only be to God. That is why many Christians feel they cannot go to war.

It is not because Christians do not love their country. It is because they belong to another country, a kingdom that is larger than any country. They would be good citizens here; God commands them to be. But they cannot obey any commands of their country which are against God's commands. The reason many Christians have felt they can't go to war is because every country has members of God's kingdom and the idea of killing a brother in Christ for an earthly king is abhorrent to them. Christians have wrestled with these issues since the beginning of the Church. Whatever position one holds must be consistent with Peter's word that we are strangers in this world, chosen for a kingdom greater than this world.

But we're not just a separate kingdom; we are a kingdom of priests. What's with that? What do priests do? They offer sacrifices. So, what sacrifices do we

offer to God as priests? Hebrews 13:15 says, “let us continually offer to God a sacrifice of praise—the fruit of our lips that confess his name. And do not forget to do good and to share with others for with such sacrifices God is pleased.” Romans 12: 1 says, “Therefore I urge you brothers, in view of God’s mercy, offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God, this is your spiritual act of worship.” In Romans 15:16 Paul refers to his priestly duty of proclaiming the gospel of God so that the Gentiles might become an offering acceptable to God. So, in other words, as priests we are to live among the world as people who declare God’s praises, show his glory and bring others into his kingdom.

That purpose dramatically affects the way we respond to those around us. For example, when and if we are mistreated by others, our goal is not to gain revenge, but to gain converts. Our purpose is to save those who persecute us because God deserves their praise too. This is hard to do. It is easier to reject being God’s chosen rather than choosing God and being rejected. It is easier to leave the kingdom of God so we can be safe in the kingdoms of world. And in fact that is exactly what some of the early Christians were deciding to do. They had decided that this chosen people stuff wasn’t what they thought it would be.

So Peter closes this section with a strong admonition. “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 (vs 11-12). Peter's message is challenging: to be chosen people, a royal priesthood, a "holy" people, to be a people who belong first and foremost to God, not to this world. Quite frankly, this kind of life doesn't come natural to us. It helps to have a few role models. One of mine is the Flying Scotsman, Eric Liddel.

Liddel was a student at Oxford in the 1920s. He was preparing to be a missionary to China. Eric was also a gifted runner and soon became a kind of sports celebrity who would compete in races in the country villages. Often at those races he would also gather people afterward and preach to them. He made sure everyone knew why he ran. He would say, "*God made me fast. And when I run fast, I feel his pleasure.*" Liddel was chosen to represent his country, Great Britain, at the 1924 Olympics in Paris, France. He was excited to go, but he saddened to discover when he arrived in Paris that the preliminary heats for his race, the 100 yard dash, were to be held on Sunday. His religious tradition had taught him that the Sabbath was a day of rest and to run in the Olympics on that day would violate his conscience. So he told the committee he couldn't run. When the papers back home heard of Eric's decision, they were very critical of him. At one point representatives of parliament and even members of the British royal family put pressure on him to run. They appealed to his loyalty to country and king. Liddel told them to save their breath. As much as he loved his country, he could not

dishonor his God. Here is my favorite scene in the movie where Eric's courageous stand is shown. What's really cool about this story is the amazing way God honored Eric for his choice. You'll have to watch the movie yourself to see how.

I think Eric Liddel understood Peter's teaching. He knew he was chosen by God, and knowing that, he wasn't intimidated when he was rejected by men. He knew he belonged to the Kingdom of God, so he wasn't influenced by any kings in the world. He knew he was called to be a priest for God's glory, so he wasn't that intoxicated by the world's vain-glory. Eric's story was played out on the world's stage. Our story will probably not make headlines. But everyday we are put into positions of making the same kinds of choices Eric had to make, answering the same questions he had to answer: *Who am I? Who do I belong to? What is the purpose of my life?*

Peter calls us to accept the invitation to be a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God that we might declare the praises of him who called us out of darkness and into his marvelous light. Peter invites us to choose now the Christ who was chosen for us before the creation of the world; to choose now to be part of that holy Kingdom that was prepared for us long before God ever planted a garden in Eden. It all comes down to a choice, whether or not we will choose to be different, a different people, whether or not we will choose to be chosen. May God help us to choose well.

