

“Vanity Fair”  
I Peter 2:11–12  
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We will start by reading I Peter 2:9–12 but our focus for this study will be on particularly verses 11 and 12. I Peter 2:9–12 says [9] *But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light. [10] Once you were not a people, but now you are God's people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.*

[11] *Beloved, I urge you as sojourners and exiles to abstain from the passions of the flesh, which wage war against your soul. [12] Keep your conduct among the Gentiles honorable, so that when they speak against you as evildoers, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day of visitation.* This is God's Word.

When you saw the sermon title what did you first think of? Some might have not even really thought of anything. Others may have thought ‘wasn't this a movie recently?’ And yes in 2004 there was a movie titled ‘Vanity Fair’ starring Reese Witherspoon. More likely some of you realized there is a magazine with the title of Vanity Fair and a year ago on the front cover of this magazine it introduced former Olympic Gold Medalist Bruce Jenner's new identity and transformation with the words across his picture that read ‘Call Me Caitlyn.’ That was a stunning example and vivid picture of the beliefs and values of our world today.

My next question is do you know where the title Vanity Fair was first used? The term Vanity Fair came from another publication released over 300 years ago. It is a book second only to the Bible in number of copies sold worldwide and it has been in print every year since 1678 when it was released as a book. The book begins with these words; *As I walked through the wilderness of this world, I came upon a Den, and I laid down to sleep; and as I slept, I dreamed a Dream.* The book's author is John Bunyan and the original title of the book was, The Pilgrim's Progress From this World to that Which is to Come Delivered under the Similitude of a Dream.

I've been reading and rereading Pilgrim's Progress for the last month and listening to it on audio and I've been fascinated, encouraged and challenged again by the perspective of the Christian life that Bunyan brings out in this great book. All the more amazing is that Bunyan wrote Pilgrim's Progress while in prison in Bedford, England. He spent 12 years off and on in prison and his only crime was preaching the Gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ as a Baptist preacher without a license from the official Church of England. He felt that to have to have that license was in violation of God's Word and his conscience.

Pilgrim's Progress tells the story of the spiritual journey of a man named Christian who leaves his home in the city of destruction to head to the Celestial City which is a representation of heaven. Vanity Fair is a place in that book that Christian and his friend Faithful must pass through on their way to the Celestial City. We will look more into that a little later in the study. For now I want us to see as Christians, as Pilgrims, how we are to live in this world as we are on that path of that which is to come.

I want to consider three points from the passage in I Peter 2 that describes a pilgrim's life on the way to the Celestial City and that we will be challenged by three things – that we would be good strangers, live good lives and do good deeds. I Peter 2:11a says [11] *Beloved, I*

*urge you as sojourners and exiles... to abstain from the passions of the flesh, which wage war against your soul.*

To be good strangers we must understand that we are completely loved by God and that we belong to Him as His precious children. That is why He addresses us as 'beloved' in this verse. These truths would have been very precious to the recipients of Peter's letter because they were facing various forms of persecution and unjust suffering for their faith. These two facts are critical for us to remember because we will also experience various forms of persecution and suffering in this world as Christians. By God's good providence our persecution today hasn't reached the level of those during the days of Peter when he wrote to them.

When Pastor Reeder did his Travelling Route 66 Bible series a few years back on Sunday nights, he said that Peter wrote the book of I Peter for three reasons. One was to prepare Christians to defend their faith winsomely, two, to suffer courageously and three, to live consistently for Jesus Christ. That is what we will focus on in this study. There is something profound in suffering or experiencing persecution, rejection, ridicule, mocking or some other difficulties for the sake of Christ. When we experience that we are tempted to think that God doesn't love us or that He is not paying attention to us but the opposite is true for our heavenly Father knows, loves and deeply cares about what we are going through at every moment.

Peter writes in I Peter 2:19, *[19] For this is a gracious thing, when, mindful of God, one endures sorrows while suffering unjustly.* That's amazing for God says suffering as a Christian for Christ is a gracious thing. All of this is why Peter addresses his recipients as 'beloved' in I Peter 2:11. In the next part of that verse the New American Standard version translates the words sojourners and exiles as strangers and aliens. The King James version says strangers and pilgrims.

There was a Christian Rock Band back in the 1980s known as Petra. They had a great song titled 'Not of This World.' This song came out in 1983. There are some who probably wouldn't care for the tune of this song but the words are what I want you to hear.

*We are pilgrims in a strange land  
We are so far from our homeland  
With each passing day it seems so clear  
This world will never want us here  
We're not welcome in this world of wrong  
We are foreigners who don't belong  
We are strangers, we are aliens  
We are not of this world.*

The Bible tells us we are not to love this world either.

In Pilgrim's Progress, after Christian, the main character is converted to Christ and on his way to the Celestial City, he meets a man who will be his companion along his journey and the man's name is Faithful. He is one of the great characters in the book. Christian and Faithful are told by another man, Evangelist, about the town of Vanity and a fair that is kept there year round. He tells them what both of them will face in this town. This is how he brings the two pilgrims into the town of Vanity. This is what the Evangelist says;

*Then I saw in my dream, that when they were got out of the wilderness, they presently saw a town before them, and the name of that town is "Vanity"; and at the town there is a fair kept, called "Vanity Fair"; it is kept all the year long. It bears the name of Vanity Fair, because the town where 'tis kept is lighter than vanity; and also because all that is there sold, or that comes there is vanity. As is the saying of the wise preacher, "Vanity of vanities, all is vanity."*

Bunyan uses the town of Vanity and the Fair that is held there year round to represent this world, the trials and temptations that we must pass through as we head to the Celestial City. He is getting at the point that we are living in this world but we are not of this world nor can this world ever satisfy us because it is full of vanity and worthless things. There are good things in this world. I love what Tim Keller says, he says that ‘idols of the heart are almost never bad things. They are good things that become ultimate things, supreme things to us.’ So all of life, while we are in this world, if it is not lived for Christ, by Christ and unto Christ and the glory of God, then satisfaction will never come to our hearts for our home is not here and our hearts shouldn’t be here either. We should fix our minds and hearts on the things above as it says in Colossians 3.

These are the ways we become good strangers, good pilgrims. We are continually reminded that we belong to God, that we are loved by God and we are not to love this world because we are not of this world. We are also called to live good lives. I Peter 2:11b–12a says *[11b] as sojourners and exiles to abstain from the passions of the flesh, which wage war against your soul. [12a] Keep your conduct among the Gentiles honorable...*

So the two main ways we can live good lives are to abstain from sinful desires and to keep our behavior excellent among those in the world. The phrase, abstain from the passions of the flesh or sinful desires is something that very easy to understand but impossible to do, at least impossible to do perfectly in this life or even progressively if we’re not utilizing the power of God through His Holy Spirit. This means do not sin and it’s that simple. I John 2:1 says *[1] My little children, I am writing these things to you so that you may not sin. But if anyone does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous.* God commands us to never sin and to always abstain from all sin.

While that should be our purpose His Word also reminds us that it will not be our practice, at least not perfectly in this life. That shouldn’t lessen our Holy Spirit determination to constantly be putting all sin to death in our lives for this is what it means to pursue holiness. I Peter 1:14–15 says *[14] As obedient children, do not be conformed to the passions of your former ignorance, [15] but as he who called you is holy, you also be holy in all your conduct.* J.I. Packer in his book Keep in Step with the Spirit, says ‘the ordinary way that the Holy Spirit leads us into holiness is by His enabling us to form holy habits through discipline persistence.’ He anticipates that some will criticize that to say that is works and performance so Packer goes on to say ‘holiness by habit forming is not self-sanctification by self-effort but it is simply a matter of understanding the Spirit’s method and then keeping in step with Him, the ordinary way the Spirit works, so then we are always to be pursuing holiness by putting away sin.’

I want you to notice why he says we should do this in I Peter 2:11b which says *[11b] abstain from the passions of the flesh, which wage war against your soul.* It wages war against your soul. All sin, every sin, if possible, would destroy our souls and if we were not kept by the amazing power of God, fully and finally falling away, then we’d be lost but God through His power enables us to endure. That is what sin will do and that is why we are to abstain from all sinful desires. To help us do this and grow we need to be accountable to someone so get in a small group or Bible study. One of the great things about Pilgrim’s Progress is throughout the whole journey every Christian had companions or a companion with them to constantly help them on their way to the Celestial City.

The second thing Peter says in order to live good lives is to keep our conduct among the Gentiles honorable or keep your behavior excellent among those in the world. This is what Jesus means in Matthew 5:16 when He says *[16] In the same way, let your light shine before others, so*

*that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven.* This past week during our Vacation Bible School that is what we were challenging our kids to do as well. So to live good lives abstain from sinful desires and behaviors and keep your behavior excellent among those in this world. Both of these practices reflect the pilgrim's progress on his path of sanctification.

The third thing coming out of this passage in I Peter 2 is to do good deeds. Notice the second part of I Peter 2:12 which says *[12] Keep your conduct among the Gentiles honorable, so that when they speak against you as evildoers, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day of visitation.* The New American Standard version says *[12] Keep your behavior excellent among the Gentiles, so that in the thing in which they slander you as evildoers, they may because of your good deeds, as they observe them, glorify God in the day of visitation.* There is something very important that we need to come to grips with and clearly understand as pilgrims who do good deeds in a world where we don't belong. It is that no good deed goes unpunished. Don't forget that. Do not expect the watching world of unbelievers to stand up and cheer or applaud when we try to do good deeds towards them.

Going back to the Petra song 'Not of This World' says it this way;

*Jesus told us men would hate us  
But we must be of good cheer  
He has overcome this world of darkness  
And soon we will depart from here.*

We are to do good deeds. The vast majority of the world of unbelievers, the place John Bunyan calls Vanity Fair, never has, does not now and never will hold us in very high regard but we are still to be of good cheer and we'll see that here shortly. We are still called to practice love and good deeds towards the very ones who ridicule, accuse, reject and even hate us. This would be impossible except for the fact that the Holy Spirit supernaturally helps us do this and God will save some as a result when it says 'in the day of His visitation.' Some will see our good deeds, hear the Gospel and come to Christ.

I want to share a few practical ways we can practice love and good deeds and then we'll get to the end of Vanity Fair. The first thing we can do is practice the golden rule. Luke 6:31-36 says *[31] And as you wish that others would do to you, do so to them. [32] "If you love those who love you, what benefit is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them. [33] And if you do good to those who do good to you, what benefit is that to you? For even sinners do the same. [34] And if you lend to those from whom you expect to receive, what credit is that to you? Even sinners lend to sinners, to get back the same amount. [35] But love your enemies, and do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return, and your reward will be great, and you will be sons of the Most High, for he is kind to the ungrateful and the evil. [36] Be merciful, even as your Father is merciful.*

Mercy, that is it! It is Christ of mercy without measure. That is what this unbelieving world needs from us. That is what we needed – Christ of mercy without measure – and that is what we received and what we get every day. His mercies are new every morning. We must give mercy without measure and we must outlove our enemies remembering that our neighbors and unbelievers are not our enemies but they are victims of the Enemy. II Corinthians says that Satan has blinded the minds of the unbelievers so that they may not see the glory of the Gospel in the face of Christ. Our battle cry is love. Our call to war is to love the captive soul and yet rage against the Captor.

A great example of practicing the golden rule is an unknown pastor named Ken Smith and his wife who several years ago entered into an unlikely relationship with someone who would eventually become an unlikely convert. Her name is Rosaria Butterfield. Rosaria was an English Professor at Syracuse University and a passionate supporter of LGBT rights. She actually wrote the LGBT policies for Syracuse University. She was a Lesbian. In the 1990s Promise Keepers came to town and she wrote a scathing article about Promise Keepers and Christians that was published in the news. She said she received a lot of mail about that article. She received fan mail and hate mail and much of the hate mail was from Christians but there was one unknown pastor named Ken Smith who sent a letter to her that was gracious and he invited her to enter into dialogue with him by coming to have dinner with him and his wife. She accepted the invitation.

For two years a relationship began with that pastor, his wife and Rosaria and it ended with her becoming a Christian. Rosaria Butterfield is one of my heroes today. I believe everyone should read her book titled Openness Unhindered and is taken from the last two words of the book of Acts. This is where Paul was preaching and teaching the Kingdom of God concerning Jesus Christ with all openness unhindered. So in practicing the golden rule we are to love the lost and treat them the way we would want to be treated.

Secondly, we want to engage the lost as people and not evangelize them as projects. That is what Ken Smith did with Rosaria Butterfield. He engaged her as a person. Two excellent books that can help you in this area are Tactics by Greg Koukl and Questioning Evangelism by Randy Newman. When entering into these relationships with the lost it can be tricky with our dialogue with the lost so we have to practice the Biblical virtue of tolerance. Tolerance actually is a Biblical virtue but it has been wrongly defined today by the world.

J. Warner Wallace does a daily email called Cold Case Christianity and last month he did one called the Three Ds of Tolerance. In it he discusses the redefinition of the word tolerance and he says ‘historically tolerance was defined as the fair objective and permissive attitude towards those whose opinions, beliefs, practices, racial or ethnic origins differ from our own.’ In other words, tolerance meant we tolerated people even though we argued passionately against their bad ideas. Here is something he said in his third point; ‘tolerance requires a demeanor and response certainly but our response includes a loving demeanor towards those whom we disagree with. It’s okay to hate bad ideas as long as we remember to love the one who holds bad ideas.’ It’s very important that we do that.

So a third way we practice love and good deeds is we rejoice and praise God when we are mistreated by those in this world who are unbelievers. The Apostle Paul, after being stoned, dragged out of the city and left for dead, got up and went and preached the Gospel again in the same region. Then it says Paul did this in Acts 14:22, *[22] strengthening the souls of the disciples, encouraging them to continue in the faith, and saying that through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God.* Paul uses himself as a vivid example of how they must enter the Kingdom of God through many tribulations. God wants us to have this mindset.

There does seem to be a softness among us as Christians in the West, doesn’t there? We live in a land of ease compared to many of our brothers and sisters in Christ who are suffering greatly for the cause of Christ around the world. The church in America today does seem on many levels unable to put up with minor rejection. We can’t even tolerate being made fun of or ridiculed, much less something more serious. We face uncertain days as to what lies ahead for the people of God in America but God wants us to have a mindset like we see in I Peter 4.

I Peter 4:14 says [14] *If you are insulted for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon you.* In Matthew 5:11–12 Jesus said, [11] *Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. [12] Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you.* We are to count ridicules and mocking as a blessing for our reward is great in heaven. Doing good deeds means practicing the golden rule, engaging the lost as people and not evangelizing them as projects and then we're to rejoice and praise God when we are mistreated by others for the cause of Christ.

In closing I want to share briefly about Christian and Faithful in Pilgrim's Progress and their time at Vanity Fair. One reason I love the chapter on Vanity Fair is because it seems like that is where our world is today and certainly where it is headed. I'm not sure we'll get to the extreme measures any time soon that Christian and Faithful experienced but it does seem to be heading there. When they came to the town it says they created a huge commotion. There was great confusion and Bunyan says there was a hubbub because of these two pilgrims. It was because of the way they were dressed, talked and viewed the wares of all the things that were for sale in Vanity Fair. They didn't look like the world. They didn't talk the same because they used the language of Canaan, of heaven and so the people couldn't understand what they were about.

They really hated the fact they weren't interested in all of the things that were for sale there in Vanity Fair. At one point when men and women would yell at them to get them to come by to see the different things in the Fair it says that the pilgrims would put their fingers in their ears and look upward saying 'God, turn away my eyes from looking at Vanity to stop looking and loving the things of this world.' One man looked at them with great derision and said 'what do you buy?' and the pilgrims said 'we buy truth.' This is from Proverbs 23:23 which says [23] *Buy truth, and do not sell it; buy wisdom, instruction, and understanding.* In other words, cling to the truth of God's Word and what He says about life. That made the people at Vanity Fair all the more mad that they would think that they had exclusive truth. So the people began to berate them, reject them and persecute them. Bunyan says these men being patient did not return insult for insult but instead blessing, good words for bad, kindness for injuries done. The more they were persecuted the better they behaved.

Some in the town called them good guys because they could actually see them doing good things even though the town was mad at them. That made some even more mad that some wanted to follow them and some began to follow them. One of the neat things about this is that there is a character right after Vanity Fair who joins Christian on his journey named Hopeful. He was converted because he saw behavior of Christian and Faithful in Vanity Fair.

As a side note, Dr. Derek Thomas who is a seminary professor at Reformed Theological Seminary in Atlanta, Georgia has put together a wonderful teaching series on Pilgrim's Progress. As he goes through the section on Vanity Fair he tells a story of teaching on Pilgrim's Progress at a conference. He goes to lunch with some people and in that group is a man who is about 23 years old and the young man is getting ready to go overseas as a missionary to a real difficult and dangerous place. He is telling the group about it but he can't tell them where he is going and another person at the table said 'isn't that a closed country?' The young man responded, 'not if you're willing to die.' There are no closed countries if you are willing to die for Christ. Wow, what a perspective!

In Pilgrim's Progress before Christian and Faithful get to Vanity Fair the Evangelist tells them that one or both of them will lose their life as a result of their testimony of Christ. At

this point where everyone in Vanity Fair is mad and they arrest these two pilgrims, it says as both are sitting in prison they both secretly in their hearts were hoping that they would be the one to go first for the cause of Christ. We tend not to have that perspective. They were willing and wanting to die for Christ. I want you to hear and get a sense of what happens to Faithful during this time.

They bring in false witnesses – Envy, Superstition and Vain Glory – to state lies about Faithful. Envy says about Faithful, ‘even though he has a good name he is one of the vilest men in our country.’ Isn’t that what the world says about us today? They have this trial and it says the jury comes back in. Here are the names of the jurors and what they said about Faithful.

*Then went the jury out, whose names were Mr. Blindman, Mr. No-good, Mr. Malice, Mr. Love-lust, Mr. Live-loose, Mr. Heady, Mr. High-mind, Mr. Enmity, Mr. Liar, Mr. Cruelty, Mr. Hate-light, and Mr. Implacable; who every one gave in his private verdict against him among themselves, and afterwards unanimously concluded to bring him in guilty before the judge. And first among themselves, Mr. Blindman, the foreman, said, I see clearly that this man is a heretic. Then said Mr. No-good, Away with such a fellow from the earth. Yes, said Mr. Malice, for I hate the very looks of him. Then said Mr. Love-lust, I could never endure him. Nor I, said Mr. Live-loose, for he would always be condemning my way. Hang him, hang him, said Mr. Heady. A sorry scrub, said Mr. High-mind. My heart riseth against him, said Mr. Enmity. He is a rogue, said Mr. Liar. Hanging is too good for him, said Mr. Cruelty. Let us dispatch him out of the way, said Mr. Hate-light. Then said Mr. Implacable, Might I have all the world given me, I could not be reconciled to him; therefore let us forthwith bring him in guilty of death.*

*And so they did; therefore he was presently condemned to be had from the place where he was, to the place from whence he came, and there to be put to the most cruel death that could be invented.*

*They therefore brought him out, to do with him according to their law; and first they scourged him, then they buffeted him, then they lanced his flesh with knives; after that, they stoned him with stones, then pricked him with their swords; and last of all, they burned him to ashes at the stake. Thus came Faithful to his end.*

*Now I saw, that there stood behind the multitude a chariot and a couple of horses waiting for Faithful, who (so soon as his adversaries had dispatched him) was taken up into it, and straightway was carried up through the clouds with sound of trumpet, the nearest way to the celestial city. But as for Christian, he had some respite, and was remanded back to prison: so he there remained for a space. But he who overrules all things, having the power of their rage in his own hand, so wrought it about, that Christian for that time escaped them, and went his way And as he went, he sang, saying,*

*“Well, Faithful, thou hast faithfully profest  
Unto thy Lord, with whom thou shalt be blest,  
When faithless ones, with all their vain delights,  
Are crying out under their hellish plights:  
Sing, Faithful, sing, and let thy name survive;  
For though they killed you, you are still alive.”*

Amen, for Jesus is our Faithful because He passed through the Fair perfectly, not taking on any of the temptations and things that Satan tried to give to Him. He is the One who is an example for us. When He was reviled He did not revile in return. When He suffered He didn’t threaten but continued to trust to Him who judges justly for He is the Shepherd and Overseer of our souls. He is our Mighty Fortress, a bulwark never failing. John says He will come back as

the conquering King and He will be riding on a white horse as faithful and true. The Lord is our Faithful Companion. II Thessalonians 3:3 says [3] *But the Lord is faithful. He will establish you and guard you against the evil one.* Cling to Him. Trust Him. It says in I Peter 2 that He is laying in Zion, a precious Cornerstone and whoever believes in Him will not be put to shame.

If you are not a Christian Jesus is also a stone of stumbling, a rock of offense. People stumble over Him because they don't love the Word. If you don't know Christ He is calling out to you and when Christian in Pilgrim's Progress became a Christian he was going around saying 'what must I do to be saved?' Evangelist said 'Go to Christ. Flee to the narrow gate, to Christ.' Christian started running toward that way and his wife and kids were begging him to stay there and come back to home to the city of Destruction. He put his fingers in his ears and said 'Life, life, eternal life!' If you are not a Christian today take Christ for your Savior and inherit life, eternal life. Let's pray.

Prayer:

Father, we thank You that You are our Faithful One. You are Faithful and True and we can follow You because You saved us. I pray if there is someone reading this that does not know You that he or she would turn their lives over to Jesus Christ, that they would pray 'Jesus forgive me of my sins and make me the person You want me to be.' Save them Lord and encourage us. Help us to trust You, walk with You and to live Godly in Christ Jesus and to confess when we don't, to get back up and encourage people along the way as we head to the Celestial City. We pray these things in Jesus' Name, Amen.