

Seems like it's getting harder and harder to be a Christian these days, doesn't it? After all, in every level of society it seems, from every angle, from every place, and at every time, from top to bottom, there's always someone saying something contrary to the Word of God. You hear in the news these days about the "new normal" that is supposed to be here now. I think that's a very telling word to use, because normal implies that this is the way things should be. Normal implies that this is the way things ought to be, the way that we should just accept that society is. I'm not talking about issues of health. That's not what I'm going after here. But I am talking about that use of the word normal to describe this situation, because there's all kinds of groups out there that use that language of normal to push things contrary to the Word of God. They'll even talk about normalizing things. So they will normalize, for example, homosexuality by putting it in every single movie that they make, even if it's just ever so subtly. Or they'll talk about normalizing pedophilia, as we've seen with some of the movies that have been produced in the past couple of months. They'll even talk about normalizing any kind of sin: that we can just sleep with whoever we want, or that love is love, or whatever it may be, because this is all, as they say, normal.

But the trouble with that word normal for us as Christians is that it implies that anyone who argues against that, who says something different from what is called normal, is in fact abnormal. You're different! You're weird! Why are you being so weird? Why can't you just get with the program? Why can't you just think the way that everyone else thinks? And so they'll start to use all kinds of nasty insults against us. They'll call us bigots. They will call us backwards. They'll call us stupid. They'll call us racists, sexist, whatever the word might be, all in a desire to get us to be, as they say, normal. And when we are normal, then everybody will get along. Everything will be just fine.

But we can't really do that, can we? As Christians. Because to go along with what the world says means that we're going to have to struggle. When the world tells us to just conform, to just get in line, to just forget, and to just compromise, it means that we're going to end up leaving God further and further behind. Until finally we've compromised so much that we don't have God at all. And so in this desire to not be different, in this desire to not be weird, to not be left out,--because who likes any of those things?--we end up compromising even on very basic things of the faith. And that is difficult, to be in this world, to be always under that kind of pressure to just conform, to just think the way the world thinks.

And Christians, there's a couple of things that we should point out here. To be a Christian means that we will always be different. We will always be weird in the eyes of the world. Because if we were just like the world, then we would be the world and not of God. But because we are Christians, sometimes it's going to be easy to be a Christian. Sometimes it's going to be very difficult to be a Christian. But at all times, we will have to struggle in this world, because that's what it means to be a part of God. Peter even calls it being an exile in our text for this evening. We are strangers in this world. We don't have a home here, because we belong to God.

The other thing to remember--and this is also Peter's point in this book, which we're going to be going through over the next several weeks--is that we have a hope in God. We have hope in the midst of all of this, because we are weird to the world. But being weird to the world means that we are known and loved by God. And God is the one who has called us. God is the one who has

made us Christians. And God is the one who brings us to himself, so that in all things God is with us always. So even if we have to suffer as Christians--and we will because we are different--God remains with us. And we know that we have that hope that we can look forward to.

But Peter also shows us in our reading for this evening that his time is not all that much different from our own. Because Christians in his time faced similar kinds of pressures, faced similar kinds of struggles that we do. Because in Roman society, for example, there was this belief that as long as everyone sort of just agreed on some very basic things--we'll all just kind of agree that we'll respect each other's gods, we'll all just kind of agree to worship these gods in particular,--and as long as we do that, everything will go great. Everything will work great. The society will be held together, and we will have peace. And they believed that so strongly, in fact, that any time there was trouble in the world--and there was always trouble, because we live in a world of sin--any time there was trouble, they blamed those who were on the outside. It was those weirdos out there with their weird beliefs and their weird practices that brought all of this upon us. Think of Nero, for example, the Emperor Nero, who, when there was a fire in Rome, blamed the Christians. It's because of them and their weird ways and their weird thoughts and their weird practices! They are so different from us that they just upset everything. And so as long as you played along, as long as you conformed to society, then everything would go well.

But the Christians couldn't do that, because it meant compromising on their beliefs. Because it meant in many cases that they would have to worship false gods, and they didn't want to do that, because as the Lord says, "You shall worship the Lord your God, and him only shall you serve." But for the Roman Christians that meant they couldn't do some very basic things. They couldn't go down to the temples, obviously. They couldn't offer the sacrifices that everybody was supposed to do, because that would be idolatry. But they also couldn't go to things like the games. They couldn't go take in a sporting event, because in those days there was always a religious sacrifice that went with it. And they couldn't even go down to the theater, because if they went to the theater it was the same story. A religious sacrifice went with it. And so in everything, the Christians had to stay away. They had to be separate from society. And that made people hate them. "It's your fault," they would say, "that all of these bad things are happening! If you just compromise on this one point, we'll leave you alone. You can believe whatever you want to believe. You can do whatever you want to do. All you have to do is offer this one little sacrifice, and then everything will be just fine."

Doesn't sound so different from our own day, if you think about it. Because how often do we hear things like: "Give up your beliefs. Give up the things that make you different. Just get along! Just believe these few little things that the state tells you to believe. Just believe these few little things that society says is okay. And then you can be a Christian! You can believe whatever you want after that. All you have to do is conform on this one little point." But we can't do that, because to do that, to compromise in the truth of God, is to forsake God. And if we forsake God, we will lose the hope that we have. And so to be a Christian, then, in our society just like in Peter's day means that we will have to suffer. We will have to struggle with the pressures of the world.

So where is our hope then? How do we stand up against such pressure in the world? How do we stay true to God when the whole world is always pushing against us to leave him behind? That's

exactly what Peter is talking about in our reading for this evening. Because we do have a hope, Christians. We do have strength. We do have a strong and a sure fortress that we can go to in the Lord our God. He is the one who has called us out of this world. He is the one who has made us weird in the eyes of the world, but being weird to the eyes of the world means that we are loved by God. And so, as Peter says here, "according to the foreknowledge of God the Father," you are elect exiles in this world. God knew who you were personally even before he created the world, and he called you to faith in his Son Jesus Christ, made you different from the world. Because being different from the world by God's calling means that you are his forever. And "in the sanctification of the Spirit." The Holy Spirit makes you a holy people, a people who are different. A people who are set apart. A people who are weird in the eyes of the world. But being different from the world and holy means that you are being made like God. And you are being called to "obedience to Jesus Christ," because you have a different master from the world, Jesus. And having Jesus as our master, Jesus as our Lord, means that it doesn't matter what the world says or thinks. What matters is what God says or thinks. And Jesus has sprinkled you with his blood, so that in him you now have a grace and a peace which the world cannot know. Grace in Jesus to everlasting life, and peace which the world cannot know because it is a peace beyond all understanding. A peace which lives even when you are suffering in this world. And so the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, the holy Trinity calls you to himself out of this world and makes you different from it. And because he is the one who has called you, he will keep you safe in every trial and circumstance.

So when the world insults you, and it will, when the world attacks you, and it will, when they utter all kinds of evil against you falsely because of Jesus, rejoice and be glad, for yours is the kingdom of heaven. And God has called you to himself in his Son Jesus Christ. We are weird to the world, yes, but that's a good thing, because we belong to God.

To the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit ,be all glory, honor and worship, now and forever. Amen.