

We often form our impressions of different groups in the world based on what individuals do, based on how that one single person acts. So our feelings about the whole group depend on how we feel about that one person. That group of people over there, they're kind of rude, because I remember that one person from there who was rude towards me. Or that group of people over there, they're kind of loud and obnoxious, because I remember how loud and obnoxious that one person from there was. And that's how we tend to look at the world, basing our feelings on what individual people do. Of course, we might say, "Now, hold on a second! I don't want to do that. I don't want to stereotype people. I don't want to judge people in that way." And that's fine. But I think the fact that we're so quick to protest that shows how often it actually happens. If we're quite honest with ourselves, this is just what we do. Because it's not like we can visit everybody that is a part of that group and form our opinion based on all of them. We go on what we know from that one individual person. Because, honestly, we have our group. We like our group. And we judge the rest of the world in comparison with that group. And what that one person from over there does is going to color how we think about everyone else.

Now, Christians, even if we don't want to do this--and that's fine--the world is going to do it to you. Because you are part of a group. You are part of the Church, the body of Christ. And you are different from the world. And the world judges the Church based on what it sees you doing. The world judges God based on how you act. Your conduct, in that sense, colors the impression that the world has of all of us. Now, we might say, "That's not fair. They shouldn't do that. They should be more fair towards us." But whether it's fair or not, Christians, that's just how it is. That's how the world works. And the world doesn't know God, and for that reason, it can only judge based on what it sees. And we are what it sees. So what we do, good or bad, is going to influence how the world thinks of all of us. So the question we have to ask ourselves today is: what impression are we giving to the world?

Because we have to remember, Christians, that we are outsiders. As Peter says in our reading for today, we are "sojourners and exiles." We don't belong to this world. We are not part of it. We are strangers and foreigners who are passing through. Just like the hymn that everyone loves to sing, "I'm but a stranger here. Heaven is my home." Because too often, I think, we think of ourselves as part of the world. We live here. We have our house here. We work here. We do everything here. So we're part of the world, right? But that's not how it works. We are indeed strangers. This is not our home. Heaven is our home, and we will never truly be home until we are with God in eternity. So we are tourists, Christians. We are strangers in a foreign city. And those who are part of this city are watching us, and they're asking, "How are these outsiders, how are these strangers going to act?" They are suspicious towards us, and they're especially suspicious whenever we do things that they consider to be strange or offensive.

But let me make one thing clear here, Christians, one thing that we have to understand above all. The world will always be suspicious of us. It will never like us. If the world does like you, that should make you suspicious, because you should ask in that case, "Why? Why does the world like me so much?" Maybe we are more like the world than we care to admit. But as long as we are Christians, we will always be outsiders. We will always be different. We will always not belong to this world. And so the world is always going to treat us as something different. They will always speak against us. They will always treat us as if we were doing something wrong. That's something we can't avoid. We can't get around it, no matter what we do. If we are being

faithful to God, the world will still attack us anyway. We need to accept that as Christians. But if we're doing something wrong, Christians, the world will also attack us for that. But in that case, the world will be right to do so. And they will see us and say, "See? These Christians really are trouble! They really are a problem. Just look how this one in particular is acting." They base what they think of all of us on the actions of one. So Christians, how then will you act? Is the world going to have a good reason to attack you or not?

And to really drive home this point for us today, Peter uses the example of authority. Because being a Christian in his time meant that Christians were doing things that the world considered to be destructive. The kind of things that would tear society apart, things that seemed almost criminal to those around them. You can imagine somebody in Peter's time saying, "What do you mean that you can't worship in the temple? Society is going to fall apart if you don't do that. What do you mean that you can't sacrifice to the gods? Do you want them to hate you? Do you want them to destroy us? What do you mean that you can't participate in all the same day-to-day activities that we do? Why are you being so strange? Why are you being so weird?" And so, it was very easy for people in Peter's time to say that Christians were dangerous people, the kind of people who were going to destroy everything, the kind of people that the authorities should do something about. So what was a Christian supposed to do in that case? How does he deal with these attacks?

Peter tells us, verses 13 and 14: "Be subject for the Lord's sake to every human institution, whether it be to the emperor as supreme, or to governors as sent by him to punish those who do evil and to praise those who do good." Peter says submit to the human authorities. Listen to what they are telling you to do. Be good citizens as far as you can. Work hard, do good, be kind to those around you, whatever it is. Be better citizens than those who are attacking you so that they will not have a reason to speak against you in that way. Show that you are a great good to law and order and not a danger to society.

Now, of course, Peter is not saying here, "You should just do whatever the authorities tell you." Because if they told them to worship false gods, obviously they could not do that. Peter is not telling us to listen to the government simply because it is the government. Rather, he says submit to these things for the Lord's sake. Because Christians, in reality you only have one King. You only have one authority, and that is the Lord. And we must listen to the Lord above all things. And we listen to earthly kings only because our heavenly King tells us to. We set a good example in the world because that is what our heavenly Father wants us to do. We must listen to him without exception, without compromise. So that when the earthly king tells us to do something that would be sin, we must not listen to him at all. But when he tells us to do things that are lawful in the eyes of God, then we listen because God wants us to. Because in that case, Peter says, they will no longer be able to attack you. You will have done what is good even in the eyes of the world.

Now, of course, knowing when and when not to listen means that we have to know the will of God. And we know the will of God by listening to his Word. We need to be in the Word. We need to study it so that we know what God wants us to do. But even when we do that, Christians, we will still be spoken against, because the world will never love us. The world will always speak against us. But the world should slander us for the right reason. The world should speak

against us because we are listening to God. And when we do that, let them speak against us! What can they possibly do? Even if we do what is right, they're going to attack us. But rejoice when that happens, Christians! Rejoice when the world speaks against you for doing what is right! Because it shows that we belong to God and not to this world.

But when we do evil, the world will also speak against us, but for the wrong reason. And they will be right to do so. Because what we have done in that case is no different from the world. We have become just like them. But in the moment that we listen to God, we will silence our accusers. They will see that we have done what is right. And they will have to answer for it in the judgment. And on that day, they will glorify God that we have done such good in response to such evil, but they will do so to their everlasting shame.

But Christians, keep this in mind above all. The world will never love you. You are going to be attacked, whether you do good or whether you do evil. And the world will never love us, so we must not try to make the world love us either. Because wanting to be loved by the world is the reason why we do evil in the first place. Thinking that by doing what the world does, they'll somehow love us, or accept us, or maybe even just leave us alone. But the world is not going to love us. It never will, and it cannot. So it's not going to work. Don't try to make them love you.

Rather, turn towards God, Christians, because Jesus loves you. Jesus has made you his own. Jesus has made you citizens of a far better country than this one ever will be. And Jesus loves you so much that he gave himself for you to forgive you your sins. His approval, Christians, is the only thing that matters. Not the world's, not people's, only Jesus. So do what good that you can as you pass through this world. But above all, listen to your heavenly Master. Because you are not part of this world. You belong to God forever.

Let us pray. Lord God, heavenly Father, you have made us one with yourself through your Son, Jesus Christ. Help us always to follow after him, knowing that his approval is the one thing needed, and help us to do what is right in your sight. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.