



1 Peter 2:9-12
Character and Reputation
My Character and Reputation

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This morning we are continuing the series we started a couple weeks ago on Character and Reputation. Last week in the message on Jesus' character and reputation, I shared with you that a couple months ago Gwen and I along with our three older kids, started watching the Netflix series, "The Crown." It is a dramatized historical series about Queen Elizabeth II. There's an episode in season one called, "Pride and Joy". It's an episode that focuses on the tension between Elizabeth and her younger sister, Margaret. At one point, Queen Elizabeth and her husband, Phillip, head out on a several weeks-long journey to visit of the British Empire, which takes them all over the globe.

While gone, her sister, Margaret, is to fill in for Elizabeth at several events. Margaret gets to represent the monarchy... the Queen...the crown...and her job is simply to say the prepared scripts and represent the Queen, rightly and appropriately. Well, Margaret goes off-script at a social event where she is filling in as hostess, with ambassadors and other representatives of various foreign governments in attendance. While she doesn't make a train-wreck of things – in fact, she's portrayed in the paper as being quite a hit – she also did not represent the Queen rightly. She's way too much "Margaret" and not enough "substitute Queen." She forgot which hat she was wearing

Winston Churchill is so distraught at how she filled in, that he addresses Margaret about her performance and makes a change: Margaret is no longer filling in for Elizabeth while she's away on this journey. And when Elizabeth returns, she has to address it with her sister and tell her to make amends for some of the things she said that in the view of the monarchy were offensive and inappropriate.

Similarly, we who call ourselves "Christian", we who follow Jesus – King of kings and Lord of lords – we represent royalty, as well. We represent Jesus in all that we say and all that we do. And while we may not have newspapers trumpeting our every action for the world to read about, the world is watching. People observe how we Christians represent Jesus.

We looked at a couple passages in the first Sunday of this series that illustrated this for us, such as Jesus' teaching in Matthew 5 about letting our light shine so that people would see our good deeds and glorify their Father in Heaven. But there are so many more. Today's passage has a verse in it that is very plain and simple in this message: **“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” (1 Peter 2:12).** The larger context for this (which is helpful to understand and compare to the world in which we live) is that Peter is writing to Christians who are persecuted, who are being treated unjustly and unfairly. We get more of this just a few verses later in 2:20, when he writes, “But how is it to your credit if you receive a beating for doing wrong and endure it? But if you suffer for doing good and you endure it, this is commendable before God.”

In other words, it's nothing extraordinary to do something wrong and you endure a punishment for it. That's no great feat and doesn't benefit anyone. But if you suffer for doing good deeds, and if you receive that and endure it – and it's not difficult to imagine some Biblically themed adverbs that might go with this enduring, such as patiently, humbly, or even joyfully – then God is pleased. He will commend you.

So, comparing that to our environment today: It's not really debatable in my mind about whether or not we are suffering as Christians here in America – due to coronavirus or anything else. To me it's a clear “no.” We are not suffering. That's not to say there are no challenges – there are. I'm certainly not saying that American culture lines up with the Christian faith. It doesn't. Our beliefs about Jesus are not affirmed by the world around us; some of our Biblical values (such as joy and peace,) and aspirations of character are, but many or not. **But compared to Christians whose very lives are at stake, whose churches are being torn down, who can't openly gather in worship, who have to hide their Bibles: our difficulties pale in comparison.**

Even the Covid restrictions on churches are not really persecution. I've heard some pastors say that the Church is being persecuted here in America – especially in states like ours – because of the restrictions placed on houses of

worship. But the restrictions are placed on all religions, and there are restrictions for non-religious entities as well such as restaurants and schools. Everyone is wearing masks and distancing wherever they go. Christians are not being singled out, and the fact is, that many of our governing officials are Christians themselves! And in many churches, and this is true here at Rose Hill: the restrictions aren't really restricting us at all. For instance, the government has not said, "You can't go to church." We are limited to a certain number of people in our sanctuary, but we're not even coming close to those limits. We're limiting ourselves.

So our context is different, even if we might grumble about our faith not being affirmed in the world around us. Peter is encouraging them here to live well even in the face of persecution – in the face of that genuine suffering. **If that's the instruction ("live good lives") given to them when they are suffering for their faith: how much more should we be doing the same when we are not being persecuted for our faith?**

Verse 12 then tells us why he is encouraging them in this regard: so their good deeds would be seen and God would be glorified. It's very similar to Jesus' teaching in Matthew 5. How you and I each live out our faith reflects on the name of Jesus. Just as Princess Margaret's words and actions reflected on the Queen and the rest of the British royal monarchy, so do our actions and our words reflect on Jesus and His Kingdom.

So, I have two practical applications out of this. **First, even if your reputation and your character are not "perfect," God can transform you and work through you.** We don't all "do good deeds" as Peter says...at least not all the time. We mess up. We all can identify with Margaret and her pride that led to her mis-step. We all have mis-represented King Jesus at various times in our lives. The Good News is you need not be a perfect person with a perfect reputation to serve the Lord and shine for him. Thank God for that, right? In fact, the list of imperfect people whom God has worked through to bring about His good and perfect plans is a really long list.

Abraham lied; Sarah mocked God and laughed at him; Moses, in his anger, killed a guy; Rahab was a prostitute; David had an affair and set a guy up to

be killed in war; The disciples argued amongst themselves about who would be greatest in the Kingdom of Heaven; Paul persecuted Christians before becoming one himself...and it goes right on through the centuries to today. I stand before you as someone who used to curse a blue streak and let out my temper on the basketball court on Saturday, and then *maybe* go to church on Sunday, though I'd tell you any day of the week that I was a Christian. And now: I'm in church every Sunday! At least that part got fixed. ☺ Ok, and my behavior on the basketball court is completely overhauled.

God wants to transform us, and so He invites us to invest in our character, so that it would be good. It's what matters most – the good reputation will follow. In John 8, John records an event where a group of guys bring a gal to Jesus and tell him that they caught her in the act of adultery – of course, we might wonder why they didn't also bring the guy, and wonder if it was even his initiative, but we don't know...so they bring her and they want Jesus to condemn her and give them permission to stone her. And Jesus says to them, “Ok, whoever of you hasn't sinned, go ahead and stone her.” And they acted out a variation of the little red hen: “Not I” said the tall guy. “Not I” said the skinny guy. “Not I” said the short guy. Every single guy walks away, and the woman is left there with Jesus. He says to her, “Who is left to condemn you?” And she's like, “Uh, no one.” And Jesus says, “Neither do I. Go and sin no more.”

Some of us might be more like the guys, sitting in judgment looking at others, when what we need to do is look in the mirror. They needed God's transformative power to change their character, and so do we.

And as for the woman: when Jesus tells her, “Go and sin no more” in essence he's telling her to work on her character. It's about her transformation. So “character” is at the heart of living a godly life with a good reputation that points people to God. And it's at the heart of the message Peter writes in these verses. No matter how much they're persecuted, no matter how difficult it is to follow Jesus in their context, he's telling them to live with high character among the non-believers. To do good deeds. To speak good words. To treat people with respect and give them their dignity. Take the high road. Be gracious. All these kinds of things are

wrapped up in “living good lives” as Peter puts it here. So no matter where you’ve been or where you are, God can transform you – and it will take work on your part as well (Jesus simply tells the woman, for example, “go and sin no more”) – to be a person of good character and with a good reputation.

And then I have a second application point that I’m including today because I’ve been asked by a few people if I would be addressing this topic, or they’ve asked if I’m thinking of this topic in the background at all in this series. So, **Second: No matter what your politics are, express them in a way that shows good character and represents God well.** Christians have different political views on different topics. Some Christians are more Republican and conservative; some are more liberal and Democrat. Some are even married to each other! I met a guy just last night who is a Catholic Christian, and so is his wife, and they are on complete opposite sides of the political spectrum. Both sides will point to Scripture to support their perspective, and an awful lot of Christians are confident that Jesus would vote for “their” candidate.

There is a thing that psychologists have identified in people that they’ve called “political motive asymmetry.” **Political Motive Asymmetry is the belief that your “side” is motivated by love, but the other “side” is motivated by hate.** They’re asymmetrical. Normally this is associated with world conflict, large-scale things – like the differences between Palestinians and Israelis. But according to a 2014 article in “The Proceedings of the National Academy of Science” – which is one of the most respected scientific publications around¹ - according to this article: Republicans and Democrats both suffer from Political Motive Asymmetry. You probably didn’t need me to tell you that, but I just want to make sure we’re all on the same page here. Even 6 years ago at the time of the study the authors did and the article they wrote, they said our political landscape was “intractable.” It’s in gridlock, in large part because of this political motive asymmetry.

Unfortunately, we Christians have fallen prey to this as well. We’ve presumed that “love” is our motivator, but it’s not for those with whom we disagree politically. It shows in a lost ability to “love our neighbor” in the political realm, if our neighbor doesn’t think the same way as we do. We

have lost the ability to listen to the other side and genuinely try to understand their thinking. We have lost the ability to express our views with humility and kindness toward the other side. Mostly we just seem to think if we carry a bigger stick or express greater and greater shock at the politics of the other side, that they will change.

But don't fall for this political motive asymmetry. There *is* love on both sides of the aisle (even if it doesn't always show), **just as there is plenty of sin on both sides, too, such as arrogance, pride, boasting, and more.** So, let's set the example of actually being willing to listen to the other side, and communicating our political views with humility. As a show of humility, maybe be willing to acknowledge the faults and shortcomings of the candidates and politics you support, in addition to the things you appreciate. Or maybe be willing to genuinely understand, in a face-to-face conversation (Zoom, Facetime, whatever it takes in Covid – just not on a keyboard of any kind), why a person might vote for a different candidate than you – and if they're a Christian, take time to understand why they feel their position is supported by Scripture.

This is the kind of “good work” built on good character that will lead to a good reputation that points people to Jesus – *which is our goal*. Jesus told us to “make disciples” of him – not of a political party. That's our aim, and it's the aim of what Peter writes here to these persecuted Christians. You are representing Jesus not just in what your politics are, but in how you communicate your politics, as well. **If you communicate in the right way (in both your speaking and your listening), people will still respect you even if they differ with you, and that keeps the relationship intact.** You'll maintain the relationship and have the ability to invite them to know the King of the universe. If I can paraphrase verse 12 from our passage this morning: “Discuss politics before the pagans in such a way that though they may accuse you of voting wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God.”

So here's what it boils down to: **No matter your past or your politics, we Christians serve a risen King who rules over the universe and has our first allegiance, and His name is Jesus.** My character and reputation...your character and reputation are shaped by His life, death and resurrection...and

our character and reputation have the ability to point people to Him and lead them to Him. And that happens when we live good lives that bring honor and glory to the name of Jesus. That's the big picture to keep in mind. That's the goal. That's where we want to hang our hats, because as Galatians 3:28 says, there will be a day where "there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male and female" (Galatians 3:28)...we could add: neither republican nor democrat, liberal nor conservative..." One day there will be, as Revelation 7:9 says in a vision of God's eternal kingdom, "a great multitude that no one [can] number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb." (Revelation 7:9) They are praising the one King Jesus who no one ever marked on a political ballot or elected to his position; rather they were all marked by Him, marked as belonging to Him, transformed from a sinful past and they are the ones who are elected: elected as citizens of His Kingdom now and forever more. May it be so for you and me in this election season, through the rest of coronavirus, and beyond...in every facet of life, no matter what trials or even persecution we may someday face. May our character and our reputation more accurately reflect the Trinitarian monarchy, who together is King of kings and Lord of lords. Let's Pray...Amen.

¹ <https://www.pnas.org/content/111/44/15687>. I became aware of this article and publication thanks to a TED talk given by Arthur Brooks called, "A Conservative's Plea: Let's Work Together." His presentation can be found online easily.