

**THE  
WAR  
WITHIN**

**RICH GREGORY**

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## INTRODUCTION

Peter is one to talk. Literally. Early in his ministry this disciple could not keep his words to himself. Over and over again, we read vignettes of Peter repeatedly putting his mouth in front of his head. His particular brand of impetuous and brash verbosity drew both the ire of his fellow disciples and the loving rebuke of His Lord. In light of our knowledge of his character then, it's particularly interesting that these words would be found coming out of his mouth through his pen in 1 Peter 2:11-12:

*“Beloved, I urge you as aliens and strangers to abstain from fleshly lusts which wage war against the soul. 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.”*

Clearly, this is a man who had learned to war against his flesh, had harnessed the power of his tongue, and then pointed his life down a path that brought honor to the

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Lord. In light of this powerful portrait of grace at work, it's critical that we pay attention not only to his admonition, but also to his instruction on how a life can be transformed so that it can stand as a towering, monumental testament to the grace of God at work in our fragile selves. Here is a man who discovered through his experience the power of a transformed life to proclaim the gospel.

Peter rightly grasped the reality that an upright testimony is the most important tool you have in proclaiming the excellencies of what Christ has done in you. He also understood clearly the damage that can be done by your testimony if you claim the name of Christ but fail to win the war against your flesh. If your life is what it should be, your redeemed walk will be a daily display of grace, but if your daily life is a wreck, then your voice loses its volume. While it is true that God can – and often does – work in spite of our failings, a Christlike life is the foundation upon which your presentation of the gospel is grounded.

For this reason, in 1 Peter 2:11-12, Peter urges us to pay attention to our testimonies. He pleads with us to closely watch our lives so that when unbelievers evaluate us, they see lives of consistent Christlikeness that bring glory and honor to the Lord. A clear testimony is the most important evangelistic tool you have. But it's also your greatest vulnerability.



Because of what is at stake, Peter starts this section with highly emotional language. He writes, "Beloved, I urge you" (2:11). That word, *beloved*, is a term that is never used in ancient classical literature for affectionate relationship. Yet, when you enter the pages of the New Testament, that is the exclusive use of the word. Peter is reminding these people that they have been loved by God, and that even though they're aliens (1:2), they are not alone. When he writes, "I urge you," he selects a word that means *to beg, to implore, to plead, to appeal*. Because they are loved, Peter has the right to say, "Friends, coworkers, brothers, fellow blood-bought citizens, I beg of you, do not forget about the importance of your daily life."

If it were just Peter making this appeal, that would be enough for us to take him seriously, but this is not just Peter talking. As we know, Peter is penning the very words of God, and thus there is divine urgency behind his admonition, and it is none other than the Lord who says, "Loved ones, I urge you, don't forget to abstain from the lusts that wage war against your soul. Don't forget to keep your behavior excellent among those who are watching." One commentator puts it this way, "Though Peter is writing, it is the omnipotent God of the universe saying to his blood-bought children, 'I beg of you, please pay attention.'<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Kenneth Wuest, *First Peter in the Greek New Testament for the English Reader* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1942).

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## WHAT YOU AREN'T SUPPOSED TO DO

First, let's look at what you aren't supposed to do. Peter writes, "Abstain from fleshly lusts which wage war against the soul" (2:11). What are these fleshly lusts? Although Peter does not get into a specific explanation here, there are a number of places where they are listed for us in Scripture (Gal. 5:19, I Cor. 6:9-10; I Tim 1:9-10; Eph 5:3-5). You may turn to Galatians and read the list and say to yourself, "None of those things happen in *my* house." But Paul goes on in Galatians 5:19, and he prods our soul with these words, "and other things like these." It is clear that no one is off the hook.

We all recognize that we are impacted by these desires, and that we need to engage in the work that is being prescribed. If Peter had started his letter with this command, we would be left wondering, *How?* We could rightly object that this command, taken in isolation, is not something that I'm able to do in and of myself.

It's important to note here that Peter didn't start his letter with this command. He began this letter by focusing upon the reality of your salvation. He wrote about the power of the Spirit of God at work in your life, producing new birth,

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new life, and new obedience. Only after having discussed the life-transforming power of the Holy Spirit and the precision of God's Word at work does Peter write, "I urge you to abstain from fleshly lusts." The power to obey this command is therefore rooted in your salvation. It's in the transformation wrought by the Spirit of God as he presses the truth into your life that you now have the ability "to abstain from fleshly lusts."

Yet, even though we have been transformed and possess new life, Peter is still forced to give us this command to abstain from those lusts because our new life is imprisoned, essentially, in a body of fleshly desires. Peter's fellow apostle, Paul, rightly grasps this tension in Romans 7 when he exclaims, "Wretched man that I am! Who will set me free from the body of this death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord! So then, on the one hand I myself with my mind am serving the law of God, but on the other, with my flesh the law of sin." In light of these statements, how are we supposed to abstain from fleshly lusts? While Peter and Paul have both told us that this is dependent upon the work that He does within us, we would be wrong to assume that we are given no responsibility in this process.

That's why Peter writes very directly here, "abstain from fleshly lusts," and cease from your sin. He uses that word "abstain," which means *to hold yourself off from something, to hold back, to be distant from*. In other words, refuse to be in the same ZIP code as your sin. Hold yourself far from anything that you should not be anywhere near.

These fleshly lusts are present in everyone's life because we all have a fleshly body (Rom. 7:15-20). Therefore, even though we've been saved from the penalty and power of sin, that does not negate the reality that there are fleshly lusts that linger, forcefully coaxing our hearts toward sin. There are desires within us that teeter just on the brink of irresistibility. We know these desires when we see them, because we are all at war with them.

Peter's point is to inform us that if the armies of evil are rampaging unchecked through our heart against the Spirit of God, then we cannot have a righteous testimony. As we have seen, that's why Peter began by saying, "Be sure, I urge you, brothers, that you pay attention to your testimony."

The imagery that Peter uses in this text to emphasize his point is interesting. He uses the Greek word *stratuo*, from which we derive our English word *strategy*. In its verbal form, this word meant *to go to war* or *to wage a campaign*. This word is not referring to a skirmish or even a single battle. It is a word that means a long-term, sustained military engagement.

Our enemy is prepared to strike when we least expect. It is an enemy that melts into the shadows before you can grasp and kill it. This is why guerilla warfare is so effective—the enemy rushes out of dark places at a moment's notice and wreaks havoc upon unsuspecting soldiers. With no warning, a much smaller force can rush in and damage much larger forces, before melting back into the darkness. This is the devious nature of the lusts

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that are waging subtle and sustained warfare upon your soul. James 4:1 tells us that these internal passions waging war within us manifest themselves in contentious external behavior. The enemy is there, and when it gains ground, the results are obvious in your life.

Peter says there is an enemy army living within actively seeking to capture you. Its intention is to drag you back to enemy lines and render you useless for your Master, thereby corrupting and destroying your testimony. By its very nature, every ounce of flesh within you is waging war against you. One man said it this way, "The pilgrim of God as we see him, he carries about a battlefield inside his own personality."<sup>2</sup> Every believer who has ever walked the pathway to eternal life has experienced the sharp, painful reality of this internal warfare.

The question becomes, how? How do I abstain from those things? How do I stop giving in to these fleshy desires that have their hooks in my soul? The only way to win is through strategic warfare—to choke off their ability to fight by removing their supply lines and to reduce their territory by conducting a campaign of absolute deforestation to destroy their hiding places. Only then will the enemy begin to wither. Why? Because they can't fight if they don't have the resources and the supplies.

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<sup>2</sup> J.M.E. Ross, *The First Epistle of Peter: A Devotional Commentary* (London: Religious Tract Society, 1918).

That's what's going on in your spirit. The reason that Peter gives the command to abstain from these things is because when you give in to fleshly desires, you are feeding the enemy. You're offering him reinforcements. You're clothing him. But when you abstain, you begin to starve him.

As the Spirit of God grows within you and His desires are made manifest in your life, you will cease from these things and you will begin the process of starving that enemy to death. As the Spirit of God empowers you, this is what you must do. If you know Him, He enables you, and then you are responsible to exercise the effort and self-control necessary to starve your flesh to death. We're told in Colossians to kill our flesh and put it to death (Col 3:5). The only way to win this war against the flesh is to abstain from indulgence in that flesh. The only way to win is to go to war by the power of the Spirit. As the saying goes, "Be killing sin or it will be killing you."

How do we conduct this kind of warfare? Romans 8:13 tells us how. Paul writes, "If by the Spirit you are putting to death the deeds of the flesh, you will live." *If by the Spirit* is the key phrase. But who's taking the action? You are. You must be putting to death the deeds of the flesh. You depend upon Him for His strength, and you exercise the fruit of the Spirit that He gives you to mortify your flesh—to choke it, to starve it to death. This is the first step on the roadmap to victory.

But it's not only about what you're *not* doing. You also have to *put on* a different way of life at the same time. It's

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easy to know what not to do, but perhaps a bit more challenging to recognize what we are supposed to do.





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WHAT YOU *ARE* SUPPOSED TO DO

This is the reason Peter writes, "Keep your behavior excellent among the gentiles" (v. 12). This is what you are supposed to do.

There is likely in your English Bible a period between verses 11 and 12. In the original language, that period does not belong. It should woodenly read, "Abstain from fleshly lusts which wage war against your soul, having your behavior excellently." It's all one sentence. He's urging us to do these things simultaneously. These are not chronological tasks. We are to be putting off and putting on at the same time.

Why is it important to be simultaneously keeping your behavior excellent while also putting to death the deeds of the flesh? Because it's the result of the war on the inside that determines your actions on the outside. If your actions are righteous and yet your heart is wicked, there's a word for that—hypocrisy. In other words, if you would have a true, genuine, righteous testimony on the outside, you must first have won the battle on the inside.

Peter says to keep your behavior *excellent*. It means to be lovely or beautiful—to be winsome, gracious, fair, or noble. It's a standard of behavior that attracts and demands admiration and esteem. There is an inner nobility about you that causes your behavior to be noble and beautiful and pure and right and attractive to those who are watching. What then is the definition of this excellence? What does it mean to live in a way that could be described as noble and commendable?

According to Peter, the very definition of excellence is the person of Christ. He is the one whom Peter just finished describing in 1:19 as being “precious, unblemished, and spotless.” In short, when people look at your testimony, they should see the life of Christ resident within you. Your life must be reflective of His life. Therefore, like our Lord before us, our behavior ought to be noble, good, and beautiful—ultimately behavior that is reflective of the person of Christ, bringing glory to Him because you look like Him. That's what your testimony ought to be. Those who are watching from outside the spiritual house, they should be attracted by the nobility, beauty, and goodness of your righteous conduct. Something about you should be remarkably different.

It's clear that mirroring the mind and mission of Christ is the right strategy here. Our assumption of His character not only affirms our victory over sin, but it also displays Him to a watching world. It's for that reason that we bring all our thoughts captive to Him. Paul affirms that this tactic of putting on Christ is the right strategy for truly and permanently defeating our sin. In 2 Corinthians 10:3-5, he explains, “For though we walk in the flesh, we do not war

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according to the flesh, for the weapons of our warfare are not of the flesh, but divinely powerful for the destruction of fortresses. We are destroying speculations and every lofty thing raised up against the knowledge of God, and we are taking every thought captive to the obedience of Christ.”

Members of the household of God ought to look like they belong in heaven. That is why Peter has called them *aliens* or *elect exiles* in the opening of his letter (1:1). It's a word that means *to live alongside someone's house*. The idea is that you don't belong inside. You feel awkward and out of place when you go in. You shouldn't be able to sink into the world's living room and find a comfortable spot. You don't belong on the inside of the house because you're an alien and a stranger. God expects that your testimony be different—that you'd be waging war against the lusts of your flesh, that you'd be keeping your behavior amongst the world in a Christlike, excellent, and noble manner.

Your testimony depends upon you looking like the alien and exile that you are. That's why we embrace the fact that we're exiles. That's why we embrace the pursuit of the right kind of testimony, so that when people watch us, they see we're different and that we don't belong in this place.

## WHY WE FOCUS ON OUR TESTIMONY

The reason you must have a good and upright testimony is precisely because those who are watching don't understand, but desperately need to. When unbelievers look at you, they don't understand the stuff you are made of. When they look at your life and see genuine Christlikeness as proven by victory in the war against your flesh, they won't understand. They do not understand the glory of salvation because they cannot understand what they don't know. If they cannot see, then we must be faithful in continually showing them. And this is the reason why your testimony is the greatest tool you have in your evangelistic toolbox. You must live consistently with the message you are proclaiming.

The work won't be easy. Because just as fiercely as your flesh opposes you from within, those who are blind will oppose you from without. As Peter goes on to explain,

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when they don't understand, they will slander you, calling you an evildoer for having done what was right. The result is that they are quick to speak against you as an exile from heaven. They call right wrong, and they call wrong right. They look at the righteous standard of God as evidenced in your life, and they feel condemned because their own unrighteousness has been exposed. In an effort to cover that failure before the sight of God, they call our nobility foolishness and proceed to slander those who do right.

What do we do when the world throws stones at us for our bizarre dedication to righteousness and for our "judgmental" nature in calling sinfulness what it is? Peter answers that question by encouraging us to keep doing what we have been doing. He tells us to stay the course and maintain our testimony in their sight. The reason is because a faithful representation of Christ is the only way to help them see Christ. Their refusal to perceive the truth doesn't remove the urgency of them being exposed to it.

In the end, what will silence the slander of the unbeliever? Is it your clever presentation? Is it your thorough defense of your faith? Those things are helpful, but their effective deployment is dependent upon a testimony that causes those who are watching you to listen to what you are telling them. There was a 19th-century German philosopher who tragically wrote, "Show me your redeemed life and I might be inclined to believe in your redeemer." In other words, unbelievers don't want to hear about redemption if your life shows no evidence of being redeemed.

This is the reason why God says to us, "Beloved, I urge you, pay attention to your testimony." Do not let faithfulness slip in your day-to-day life. They must see because they need to be saved. We must pay attention to our testimony because they need to see what God looks like in you. If they do not see it in you, in whom will they see it? Beyond your love for Christ, it is out of concern for their eternal soul that you must live uprightly and abstain from fleshly lusts so that they can see a living representation of Christ. Your life is how they can see. As Peter explains, it is as they see your good deeds that unbelievers may glorify God in the day of visitation.

What's amazing about this text is that when Peter writes, "So that, because of your good deeds as they observe them, that they might glorify God in the day of visitation," he is referring not to a day of judgment, but rather to a day of mercy—a day when God comes and lavishes His mercy upon these people. He's not talking about the judgment day when God pours His wrath upon them and they say, "Oh, I remember the good testimony of that Christian I knew." He's talking about the day of salvation, the day when God pours His mercy upon them and grants them salvation. And we, by the grace of God, are privileged to play a part.

The greatest threat to your evangelism is not the difficulty of your environment. It's not the slander of unbelievers. The greatest threat to your evangelism is you. A corrupted testimony—it's your greatest point of vulnerability.

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It cripples your ability to proclaim His excellencies. But it is also your testimony—despite being your greatest point of vulnerability – that is your greatest tool in proclaiming the gospel. A message of faith backed up by a faithful life is a profound testimony that reveals the heart of our faithful God.








## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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OUR ENEMY IS PREPARED TO STRIKE WHEN WE LEAST EXPECT. IT IS AN ENEMY THAT MELTS INTO THE SHADOWS BEFORE YOU CAN GRASP AND KILL IT. THIS IS WHY GUERILLA WARFARE IS SO EFFECTIVE—THE ENEMY RUSHES OUT OF DARK PLACES AT A MOMENT'S NOTICE AND WREAKS HAVOC UPON UNSUSPECTING SOLDIERS. WITH NO WARNING, A MUCH SMALLER FORCE CAN RUSH IN AND DAMAGE MUCH LARGER FORCES, BEFORE MELTING BACK INTO THE DARKNESS. THIS IS THE DEVIOUS NATURE OF THE LUSTS THAT ARE WAGING SUBTLE AND SUSTAINED WARFARE UPON YOUR SOUL.

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