

Living for God

(1 Peter 4:1-11)

What do you live for?

Some people live for football. Avid fans who just can't get enough of football. They get the morning paper and the first thing they do is turn to the back page to read the football pages. They buy their team's kit so as they can walk around in the colours of their team, so as everyone can see they are a fan of that football team. They may even have a sticker displayed in the back of their car, or perhaps a scarf laid across the parcel shelf. They buy a season ticket and travel miles sometimes just to watch their team play. Then they come home and watch it again on Match of the Day.

For some people it might be a certain television program (e.g. Eastenders). They try to make sure they don't miss an episode, rushing around to make sure they can sit down and watch Eastenders. And if someone dares to phone them in the middle of the program they will not be happy. If it is absolutely unavoidable that they miss an episode, they make sure they record it. Even if they go on holiday for two weeks, they will make sure they record it and watch every episode when they get home. And even though they have already seen it in the week, they will still watch the omnibus at the weekend.

Still others live for work. It's not always about making lots of money either, or even getting up the ladder. For some people they simply find a purpose in working. If they are not constantly busy they feel they may not be valued. So their life becomes work.

So what do you live for? What is the thing that you think about when you first wake up in the morning? What is the thing that you make time for? What is the thing that you are most passionate about?

I guess that many of us would like to think that we live for God. God is what we are most passionate about. But is He? Are we as excited about God as we are about our football team winning the league or winning the FA Cup? Are we as eager to read our Bible as we are to find out what happens next in Eastenders?

I suppose one way of knowing what really matters to you, what you are passionate about, is to consider what you are prepared to stand up for. What things are you prepared to speak out for even if it means you will be ridiculed by others? Or if we take it to the extreme we could say that what you live for is what you're prepared to die for.

Peter's audience could certainly argue on that basis that they lived for God. They suffered at the hands of others because they were prepared to stand up for what they believed in. They were prepared to make a stand no matter what the consequences were. And let's be honest, there were some pretty severe consequences. But is being prepared to die for God the same as living for God?

Peter talks about a change that takes place when we accept Christ into our lives. Peter's audience was most likely made up of people from two backgrounds. There would have been those who had converted from Judaism, who would have had fairly high moral standards, and there would have been those who had been converted from pagan religions. They certainly would not have had high moral standards. Peter lists some of the things they were likely to have been involved in:

(v3) ...you have spent enough time in the past doing what pagans choose to do—living in debauchery, lust, drunkenness, orgies, carousing and detestable idolatry.

The problem wasn't only that these things are sinful or can lead to sin. All of these things were associated with worshiping pagan gods. That is what they had been saved from and they were now followers of Jesus Christ. To do things associated with pagan worship now would be a little bit like buying your season ticket, wearing all the gear, going to the match but then cheering for the other team. It would be like recording all the episodes of Eastenders and then taping over it with Coronation Street.

Peter talks about a transition from an old way of life they had in the past, an ungodly way of life. That was the way the pagans live but Peter reminds them that they are God's people now and he reminds them of how costly that decision has been for them.

(v1-2) Therefore, since Christ suffered in his body, arm yourselves also with the same attitude, because he who has suffered in his body is done with sin. ²As a result, he does not live the rest of his earthly life for evil human desires, but rather for the will of God.

They have suffered for their Christian faith, for being prepared to stand up for what they believe in and refusing to bow to the world's standards. So why go through all of that and then live just as sinful a life as everyone else? Why suffer for standing out from the crowd only to blend back into it again?

I don't imagine that Peter is suggesting that these things to happen instantly or even easily. Some people have the view that when we become Christians, we never sin again. As Peter says, "we are done with sin". There are many people who become Christians who have been led to believe that and have been left feeling disappointed and guilty when they find that they fall back into the same sin that troubled them before they were a Christian. For some people they find that there is a dramatic change in regard to particular things they have struggled with. Some people find that the moment they give their lives to Christ something amazing happens and they find that they are completely done with that particular sin. Of course there are plenty of other sins that take its place. But for most of us the process is more gradual than that. It's like someone trying to give up smoking, the desire is there but it's hard work and it takes time and an awful lot of will power. Sometimes that will power is strong enough and sometimes it simply isn't. Being a Christian for most of us is a bit like that.

Paul puts it beautifully in his letter to the Romans.

(Romans 7:15-19)

¹⁵I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do.

¹⁶And if I do what I do not want to do, I agree that the law is good. ¹⁷As it is, it is no longer I myself who do it, but it is sin living in me. ¹⁸I know that nothing good lives in me, that is, in my sinful nature. ¹⁹For I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out. ¹⁹For what I do is not the good I want to do; no, the evil I do not want to do—this I keep on doing.

I love that because it's so honest. Paul is telling it like it really is. That though he is a changed person (and quite clearly he was), the old Paul is still there and sometimes he can't manage to shake it off.

But that shouldn't be an excuse for us to live sinful lives. We have made a choice to follow Jesus Christ and we need also to make a daily choice to live for him. To make a choice moment by

moment to live a Christian life and not the old life we lived before we were a Christian. To live the way that God would have us live and not the way the world would have us live.

That can sometimes put us right in the firing line of criticism and ridicule from others. Peter says:

⁴They think it strange that you do not plunge with them into the same flood of dissipation, and they heap abuse on you.

For people at work, when you go out for a team night out or an office party, when everyone is getting drunk they find it hard to accept that you don't want to. Some people view that as a bit boring. When single Christians aren't sleeping around, people find it strange. Perhaps today it might be when we have an accident at work and we don't try to sue the company. Or when we do things for others without expecting anything in return.

Ruth and I used to go out collecting for Christian Aid and very often we would get asked how much of the money we got. When we explained that we didn't get any of it and we offered our services for free, some people said "you must be mad". It's not the way the world thinks.

But Peter reminds us that we will all have to stand before God one day and give an account for our lives. Which is worse, the ridicule of people or the wrath of God? Which do you live for, the applause of people or the applause of God saying "well done"?

So what does living for God mean?

Does living for God mean that you have to become a full time minister? - It may be that that is what God calls you to (it was for Richard and myself) and he may be calling you into that, but not everyone is called to be a full time minister in that sense.

Does it mean that you have to practically live at church? – well for some of you (Chris, Eileen, Derek) that seems to be the case, but not everyone has those gifts.

Does it mean that you have to become a deacon? – again some of you have been called into that, but not everyone is.

Someone asked me not so long ago if God ever calls people to stay in secular work. I would say yes. In fact I would say that God calls the majority of people to stay in secular work. Sometimes we tend to separate our church life from the rest of our life but Paul joins the two up like this:

Romans 12 (MSG)

¹⁻² So here's what I want you to do, God helping you: Take your everyday, ordinary life—your sleeping, eating, going-to-work, and walking-around life—and place it before God as an offering.

Living for God is about offering our lives to him daily. Allowing God to use us as he wishes moment by moment – when we're at work, when we're walking down the street, when we're having a meal, Paul says even when we're sleeping – give it all to God and see what God will do with it.

We often pray for the offering that God will multiply the gifts we have given. If we believe God can do that with our money, how much more can he do that with our lives, and with the gifts we have?

Use your gifts to serve God

Living for God however is not a spectator sport, it is to be participated in. It is about active living, looking for the opportunities we have to use our gifts and abilities. Peter says:

¹⁰Each one should use whatever gift he has received to serve others, faithfully administering God's grace in its various forms. ¹¹If anyone speaks, he should do it as one speaking the very words of God. If anyone serves, he should do it with the strength God provides

We all have different gifts and they are all necessary. No gift is any less important than any other gift. When we use our variety of gifts we demonstrate God's grace in all its variety. One version puts it "God's multi-coloured grace" – as though the gifts that God gives are like a rainbow of grace. A rainbow might be impressive when we see a few colours, but it's awesome when we see all the colours brightly displayed and we can see the rainbow in all its glory.

That is the point of living for God:

...that in all things God may be praised through Jesus Christ. To him be the glory and the power for ever and ever. Amen.