

## Avoiding the Ugly American Syndrome by Jeff Strite

1 Peter 4:7-4:11

OPEN: Back in 1963 there was a movie starring Marlon Brando called “The Ugly American”. It was a fictional story, but it dealt with the very real perception of Americans overseas. We were seen by many as “Ugly Americans”. As I researched this sermon I read more than one source that said that many of the people in other countries have viewed American tourists and American businesspeople as being loud, arrogant, demanding, thoughtless, ignorant, and intolerant of people who weren’t like them.

Now had that been true? Have there actually been ugly Americans?

Unfortunately, yes there have been. Too often many Americans who traveled and lived overseas behaved badly, and enough Americans acted this way that the rest of our nation became smeared by association.

And it’s easy to understand why these ugly Americans got ugly.

They thought of themselves as a privileged people.

They saw themselves as members of one of the most powerful nations on earth.

They saw themselves as part of a country that had gotten it RIGHT militarily, industrially/and culturally.

In short saw themselves as the best people on earth. They had it “all together and everybody else came in 2nd. Thus, they felt they deserved to act like “ugly” Americans.

APPLY: In our passage this morning God warns us against being Ugly American kind of Christians.

Have you ever known an “ugly” Christian?

Have you ever known a believer who was arrogant, demanding, thoughtless and intolerant?

Yeah... me too

Unfortunately, I haven’t had to look far to find an “Ugly Christian”?

All I’ve had to do was look in the mirror.

I’ve been an ugly Christian more times than I’d like to admit.

ILLUS: Rubel Shelly told of an incident surrounding the death of a man named Christopher Hitchens. Hitchens had been militant atheist who died a couple of years

ago of cancer. And you might have referred to him as an “ugly atheist.” He hated Christianity and often used demeaning and insulting language with believers. He engaged in many debates a number of Christian apologists, and he wrote a book called "God Is Not Great" which was a best-seller a few years back. Then Hitchens developed throat cancer.

Shelly said that he happened to follow some of the online comments made by Church goers about it online. He said there were a wide range of responses. Several were from believers expressing concern. Some offered hope for his recovery. And some said they were praying for him.

But then, there were also comments like these:

- "How apropos, losing the throat with which he used to blaspheme"
- "This foul reprobate in the end, knowing he shall die, will beg for forgiveness";
- And "I can't wait until the last little breath in his miserable body starts to fade, and then he will know if there is a God or not."

And Shelly wrote: “Others were even worse!”

There are times when Christians can get ugly. They think they’re doing God favors... but they’re not. Notice what Peter writes after he tells Christians how they should behave in this world. He says our behavior should be such “that in all things God may be praised through Jesus Christ. To him be the glory and the power forever and ever. Amen.” I Peter 4:11b

Christians will receive no praise for being petty. God didn’t save us to pass judgment even on the worst of sinners. That’s God’s job... not ours. God saved us to be His missionaries to folks like Hitchens.

Hitchens was a miserable, hate filled guy who made the choice to reject God and despise believers. In fact, he was not really much of a nice guy to a lot other people who weren’t believers that he disagreed with.

In the end ... well, that’s not going to turn out real well for him. And that should NOT make us happy!

God does not need or want any “Ugly American” kind of Christians.

But He does tell us what He does want. He wants us to be

- clear-minded and self-controlled so that (we) can pray.

- To love each other deeply, because love covers over a multitude of sins.
- To offer hospitality to one another without grumbling.
- To use whatever gift (we've) received to serve others
- When we speak we should do so "as one speaking the very words of God.
- When we serve we "should do it with the strength God provides"

In other words, God wants us to be "good boys and girls!" He wants us to be pleasant to be around. He wants us to be... nice. And in order for us to be those kinds of nice people, God wants us to focus on the right things. So what does God want us to focus on?

1st – God wants us clear minded and self-controlled so we can pray.

Notice, this is the FIRST thing on the list.

Why is it first? Because it tells us our first responsibility is to focus on God.

ILLUS: One survey found that 70% of Americans say they prayed every day.

But a scholar named Albert Mohler read the study that said that and observed:

"The impression left by the total package is of a nation that increasingly embraces soft and self-centered forms of spirituality even as it rejects more demanding forms of belief...they see spirituality as a means of self-development...they want to get in touch with the universe and with their inner selves, but are not particularly concerned to know what the Creator would demand of them"

([www.crosswalk.com](http://www.crosswalk.com))

In other words, these folks prayed to have God do things for them... not the other way around.

Peter writes:

Be "CLEAR MINDED"

Don't allow your mind to be distracted by the things of this world.

Don't just pray about what you want... pray about what God would want.

Be "SELF CONTROLLED"

Bend Your Will to God's Will.

If you control yourself, you'll be more focused on what God wants.

Clear your mind and bend your will so that you'll pray as you should. If you do these two things... you'll be able to pray as you should, and in prayer you'll lay hold of God's power and guidance in your life.

But, if you don't do that... you'll end up spiritually bankrupt.

ILLUS: Imagine being overseas on a trip. You've had a couple of great days of sight-seeing and you wake up in your hotel room getting yourself ready for the next day. But then you find that somebody has stolen your traveler's checks. It's all you had. You're flat broke. You have nothing. What are you going to do?

Well, I'd cry. Then I'd find a way to contact a financial institution to get some money, because I can't get any money I'm in serious trouble.

I must do what I can to make contact with someone who can help me.

That's what prayer is all about.

We are strangers and aliens in this land. Without access to our resources we can't survive here, and prayer is our connection to those resources. And so it's extremely important that we be clear minded and self controlled so that we can pray as we ought.

So first – we need to tap into God's bank account by praying as we should.

Secondly – we need to be people of love.

I Peter 4:8 tells us "Above all, love each other deeply, because love covers over a multitude of sins."

Notice love covers a multitude of sins.

Why would love NEED to cover a multitude of sins?

Because Christians aren't always the easiest people to live with. We've all sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. We all can be hard to get along with.

ILLUS: Someone once noted that Christians at church are often like a bunch of porcupines who huddle together to keep warm.

ILLUS: I read an interesting poem that said this:

"They say the world is round, and yet I often think it square;

So many little hurts we get from corners here and there

But there's one truth in life I've found while journeying east and west

The only folks we really wound are those we love the best.

We flatter those we scarcely know

We please the fleeting guest,

And deal full many thoughtless blow to those we love the best."

Now that poem wasn't specifically dealing with the church, but the lesson from that poem does describe how churches work. People are most thoughtless to those who are closest to them in the pew. Christians learn to treat others in their lives by the way they treat those who are closest to them on Sunday Morning.

Christians learn by doing.

They learn by loving.

It's what they practice with each other that makes all the difference.

And loving isn't just being an emotion.

One man once noted: "He who loves much, does much"

The guy who doesn't do anything for others can talk about love all day long but if he's all talk he's just kidding himself. God is not deceived.

In I John 3:17-18 God tells us "If anyone has material possessions and sees his brother in need but has no pity on him, how can the love of God be in him? Dear children, let us not love with words or tongue but with actions and in truth."

Do SOMETHING!!!

Don't just sit in a padded seat and think that's enough.

And I Peter 4:9-11 tells us how we should show love

\* OFFER HOSPITALITY to one another without grumbling.

\* Each one should use whatever gift he has received to SERVE others, faithfully administering God's grace in its various forms.

\* If 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"

You see, Peter is telling us:

FIND WAYS TO SHOW HOSPITALITY to someone.

FIND WAYS TO SERVE each other.

FIND WAYS TO SPEAK encouraging words to each other.

Church is a great place to learn about God - it's kind of like a miniature Bible college.

But Jesus meant it to be more than that. He meant the Church to be a laboratory where Christians would train each other in ministry and train each other how to DO love.

That's what Hebrews 10: 24-25 talks about when it says "... let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds. Let us not give up meeting together,

as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another— and all the more as you see the Day approaching.”

The church should be a training ground for us.

We should learn how to treat others OUTSIDE the church because we’ve learned to serve each other INSIDE the church.

(PAUSE)

One more thing...

As I was talking with the preachers who study with me and work on the sermons we preach, one of them said he was puzzled by something. He said: “What’s this about starts: “The end of all things is near. Therefore...”? (I Peter 4:7) and then Peter launched into a laundry list of how we should show love.

Someone once said: “Whenever you see a “therefore” in a Bible passage, you need to find out what the “therefore” is there for.

Why would Peter tell us “The end of all things is near” and then tell us all the rest of this?

As I was pondering on this, I remembered a story Jesus told in Luke 12:45-48

“...Suppose the servant says to himself, ‘My master is taking a long time in coming,’ and he then begins to beat the menservants and maidservants and to eat and drink and get drunk. The master of that servant will come on a day when he does not expect him and at an hour he is not aware of. He will cut him to pieces and assign him a place with the unbelievers.”

What was Jesus saying?

He was saying: “If you become my servant... don’t you go abusing my people. Your Christian brothers and sisters in that church building with you belong to me. I’ll take it personal if you mistreat them.

“The end of all things is near, and I’m coming back. And when I come back, if you’ve been abusing my people in any way... you and I are going to have a little talk and you will NOT like the outcome of that discussion.”

I have seen UGLY CHRISTIANS. I’ve seen believers who’ve run roughshod over others because they felt they had the right to do so. And when Jesus comes back - I wouldn’t be in their shoes for all the tea in China.

So if you get mad at one another in church be real careful how you treat each other,

because the end of all things is at hand – and you really don't want to get caught in the middle of a blood feud when Jesus comes back.

ILLUS: The church at Corinth had a problem like that.

They were always at each other's throats.

They argued about who was most important.

They argued about who had the best gifts.

They argued about legal matters and spiritual matters and marital matters.

They just plain ... argued. About everything!

And this argumentative and uncaring attitude carried over to worship time. They apparently tried to mimic the Passover Feast Jesus had on the night He was betrayed.

They had a meal first and then partook of Communion.

Their meal consisted of a potluck dinner. But their potluck was a bit different than the ones you're familiar with. At Corinth, if you didn't have a pot you were out of luck.

Some folks would show up with meat and potatoes and others would arrive with pea soup, and they ate what they brought. No one shared with anyone else. They refused to show love to each other in their fellowship... and then they'd take communion.

And Paul tells them "You have sinned against each other... and there have been consequences"

"Don't you have homes to eat and drink in? Or do you despise the church of God and humiliate those who have nothing? ... A man ought to examine himself before he eats of the bread and drinks of the cup. For anyone who eats and drinks without recognizing the body of the Lord eats and drinks judgment on himself. That is why many among you are weak and sick, and a number of you have fallen asleep." 1 Corinthians 11:22; 28-30

Their lack of love for each other led to physical sickness and actual death (Fallen Asleep). God was being very clear: "I'm not messing around here. When I say 'Love One Another', I mean it."

So this is serious business.

This Love one another thing is critical to our identity and our existence.

But we must always keep focused on the fact that it is the most powerful tool we have.

If we take it seriously, we can change the world around us.

CLOSE: Rochester, NY has a unique reputation. Back in 1940, when the award was first given, Rochester was named "the Friendliest City in America." Then they won the

contest again in 1994. As recently as 2010, Forbes.com rated 100 of the largest cities in the US and found Rochester to be a friendly city and one of the best places to raise a family.

A researcher was impressed by that and wondered why the city had such a long history of friendliness. What he discovered took him back to the year 1829.

In 1829 Rochester NY was known as "gateway to the west", a boisterous, rough town of the time. And in 1829, a daredevil named Sam Patch arrived in Rochester and announced that he would be diving from the heights of the local falls into the foaming waters beneath. In a day when there were no movies, TV or internet, this was big stuff. The great day arrived and 1000s of the local citizenry assembled to watch this man defy death.

But he didn't defy death.

He dove from the cliffs, as advertised, but apparently lost his balance. His arms twirling madly he struck the churning waters below. Minutes passed... and he didn't resurface. The audience waited in silence as they watched for him to come out on the shores below. But he never appeared. In time the crowd began to break up as the people went in shock to their homes. The man's body was discovered in the ice the following spring.

Sunday morning, 2 days after Patch's fatal jump, a prominent businessman named Josiah Bissell, arose in the 3rd Presbyterian Church and declared that all "who by their presence encouraged that soul to leap into eternity will be held accountable on the Judgment Day."

Grief swept through the church as people wept openly.

But Bissell wasn't finished. A wealthy man, Bissell sent for Charles Finney, a prominent evangelist of that day and promised to pay his expenses for six months to come to Rochester and change the heart of the city. Finney met with or confronted various groups within the community, convicting them of their need for Jesus and His forgiveness and the importance of reaching out to others for the sake of God's love for them.

The result was an entirely convicted community and a city determined to dedicate itself to good deeds and charity. That decision still influences their children and grandchildren and great grand children to this day.

Amongst the outcomes:

- The city experienced a boom in churches being built.
- They establishment of a University.

- They set up a public school system.
- Numerous charities sprung up.
- The prison system received a major transformation
- And the city became central in the fight to abolish slavery (Rochester was a station on the Underground Railroad).

My point is this. A people who are driven by nothing more than entertaining themselves and attempting to avoid being bored may feel grief, but remain unchanged in the midst of tragedy. But once confronted by the message of Jesus and the power of loving and caring for others, a society is transformed and can shake their world.

That's exactly what God is saying to Christians in I Peter 4. Don't just exist in this world, be transformed by the power of Christ and make a difference by the Savior you love.